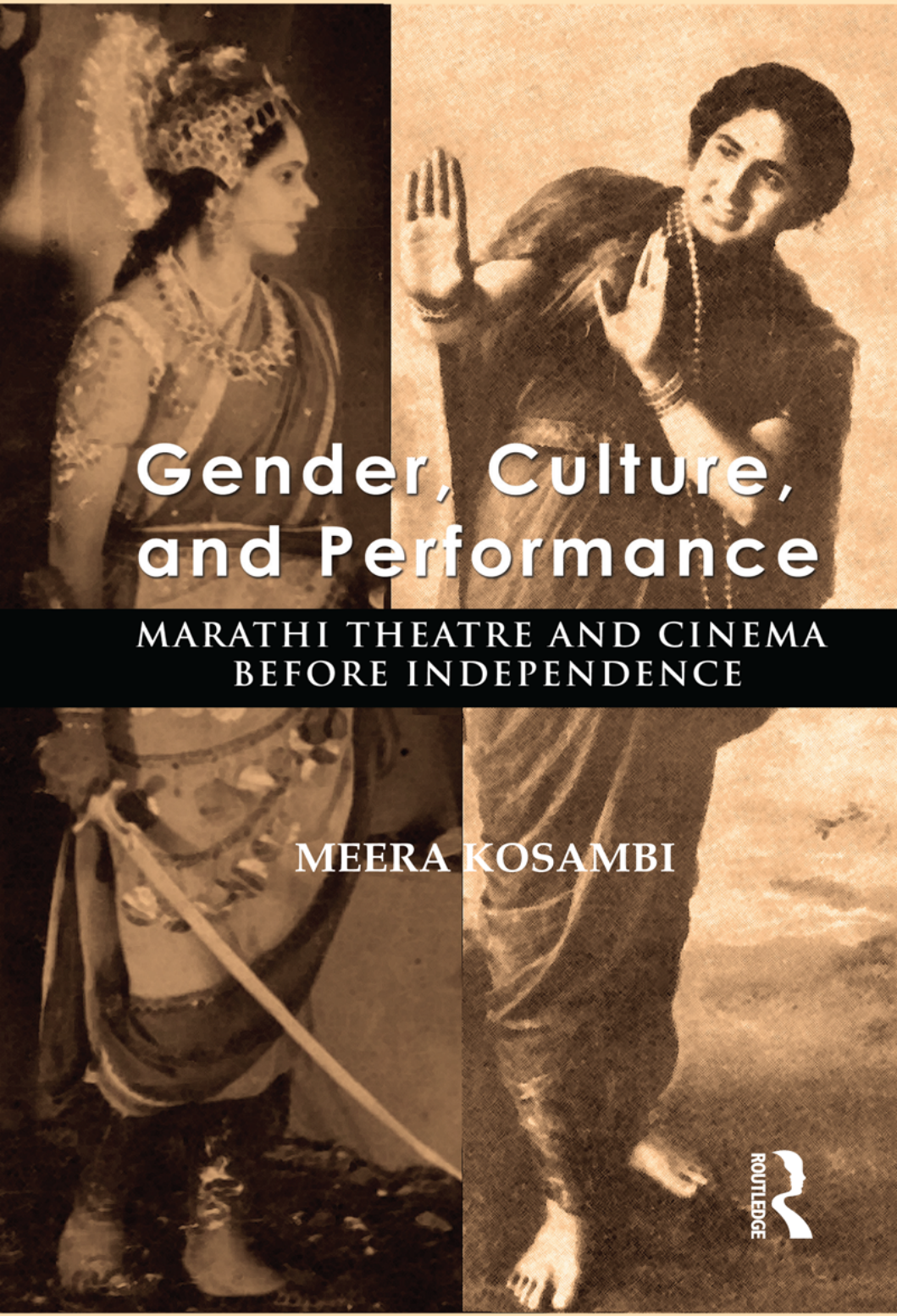
Gender, Culture, and Performance
MARATHI THEATRE AND CINEMA BEFORE INDEPENDENCE
MEERA KOSAMBI
ROUTLEDGE

# Gender, Culture, and Performance

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# Gender, Culture, and Performance

## Marathi Theatre and Cinema before Independence

Meera Kosambi

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To the memory of the women who introduced me
to theatre and cinema:

my grandmother Mrs Durgabai Madgavkar, an admirer
and exact contemporary of Bal Gandharva,

my mother Mrs Nalini Kosambi née Madgavkar who nurtured
and passed on her inherited taste for Marathi musical plays,

and my older sister Mrs Maya Sarkar née Kosambi who
first led me into the magical world of cinema

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# Preface and Acknowledgements

The metaphor encompassing the two photos on the cover can be read at multiple levels. At first glance the juxtaposition shows an armed queen on one side and a simpler woman protecting herself playfully with a defensive gesture. Durga Khote as a sword-wielding queen in her second film (Prabhat Film Company's *Maya Machhchhindra*, 1932) symbolises also the presence of actresses which enabled cinema to pose a potent threat to the hitherto dominant musical theatre buttressed by female impersonators like the legendary Bal Gandharva (seen here in the role of Rukmini in *Svayamvar*, which he had performed since 1916). Again, the new gender code of performance allowed an actress to be aggressive, while requiring a female impersonator to be excessively feminine. Barely glimpsed in the background of the photos is the contrast between the lavish film sets and simple painted stage backdrops. Such attributes of this liminal era in entertainment – which was an integral part of Maharashtrian culture – are analysed in the book in detail for the first time. In this sense the two juxtaposed photos make a succinct statement about a crucial phase in the region's entertainment history.

Theatre studies are still neglected in Maharashtra, and plays are read as drama rather than seen as performances. Many years ago my first viewing of the film version of *Hamlet* (probably the one starring Laurence Olivier) startled me into the realisation that the prince of Denmark as performed was primarily a royal warrior in perpetual motion, and only secondarily a passive, procrastinating philosopher agonising over whether to be or not to be. My last viewing of the play years later as a 'groundling' in the large and crowded standing yard at the New Globe in London confirmed the impression within the Shakespearean milieu (despite aching feet). Shakespeare, like other dramatists, was to be seen and not merely read, because that was his intention. Or alternatively, Shakespeare as seen and read produced very different effects.

But drama still enjoys primacy in India and most Marathi plays have been read for decades as works of literature and not seen – or even visualised – as scripts for stage performances. At the same time,

the valence of performance still lingers in the public mind. Individual actors, especially female impersonators like Bal Gandharva (who has been immortalised in legend and in a recent laudatory film) still dominate the collective psyche as visions of feminine beauty and fashion, charm and elegance, as if their on-stage impact was divorced from the plays – and the society – which enabled it.

This book hopes to serve as a site for the meeting of the twain and for their intersection with social and political developments within the meta-narrative of culture. Its somewhat ambitious agenda is to locate drama and performative practice within their social context which generated and was in turn shaped by specific genres of drama and forms of theatre. It analyses social transition through the themes selected – and handled in specific ways – by successive plays of note. It deals with prominent theatre companies and the much admired micro-communities they formed. And importantly, it examines the explicit or latent gender discourse that can be read in both drama and performance. Drama is preoccupied with the essentialised woman with her alleged problems and suitable solutions, alongside the 'ideal woman' who seems to have remained static over a century. In performative practice we have the prolonged exclusion of respectable women as actresses from the stage as mandated by society's moral anxiety, while also valorising female impersonators as superior artists. Early cinema managed to largely free itself from this binary and at times displayed a progressive approach.

This book is an exercise in social history: it analyses but does not theorise. A single overview of Marathi theatre from its inception in 1843 to Independence in 1947, taking into account drama, performance, and theatre production, has not so far been written even in Marathi; such a narrative in English obviously remains a desideratum in the discourse about Indian theatre within and outside the country. An addition of the three decades of cinema – which was pioneered in Maharashtra and which in many ways superseded theatre by both dislodging and absorbing it in intricate ways – completes the picture of the entertainment world as integral to the region's culture. The year 1947 forms a natural landmark because it witnessed the end of explicit or implicit anti-colonial protest which had run as a thread through plays and films.

This is obviously not a complete, encyclopaedic history I would have liked it to be, but an overview which identifies and analyses

the main trends, enlivened with anecdotes – all pruned to fit the word limit. (The spatial constraint was a severe trial because several plays had to be summarised before being critiqued unlike books on Western theatre which assume the reader's familiarity with the texts.) I finally hope to have achieved an introductory book that forms the first step in an exploration which will hopefully be continued by others.

More than any other book, this one has been a voyage of discovery for me, of making sense of my cultural heritage before laying claim to it, of tracing connections and linkages that should have been traced for us by theatre and cinema historians who have instead provided only pieces – no matter how valuable – of a vast jigsaw. This is a book I have written for myself – it is what I would have liked to read about Marathi theatre and cinema.

It was when I was in the finishing stages that I discovered this sentiment having been famously expressed years ago by Toni Morrison who said that she wrote the kind of books she did because they were what she wanted to read. Elaborating upon this, Alice Walker added that she writes all the things she *should have been able to read.* The exhilaration of finding myself in such company is accompanied by the hope that there exists a large enough readership that shares my interests to make the writing of this book worthwhile.

The bulk of my source materials are inevitably Marathi, and all the extracts cited are in my own translation. In transliterating Marathi words, my two chief concerns are to facilitate easy understanding (for which reason I have hyphenated long words), and to indicate the correct pronunciation in the absence of diacritical marks (which is why I have used 'aa' but only where strictly necessary: its consistent use and the indication of other long vowels is avoided because of their unwieldiness). The transliteration is guided by the Marathi pronunciation also for Sanskrit words: e.g., Kalidas instead of Kalidasa. I have provided courtesy translations for the titles of the Marathi works consulted, except for the rare ones which are too complicated to be rendered into simple and compact English. There are certain unavoidable anomalies in transliteration because of prevalent convention: for example, the words 'dev' and 'rao' are spelt with the same letter 'v' in Marathi and pronounced identically. As far as some old literature is concerned, preliminary matter in books

and magazine articles are paginated afresh from page 1 several times. Where only one preface or foreword exists – starting with page 1, before the main text starting again with page 1 – I have converted the pagination of the former into lower case Roman numerals.

Over the many years this book has been in the making (while other books were simultaneously being written), I have garnered materials from various institutions and individuals. I would like to thank the following institutions whose resources I have consulted. In Pune: Bharat Natya Samshodhan Mandir (and honorary librarian M. Mulye), Maharashtra Sahitya Parishad, Dr R.N. Dandekar Library of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (and librarian Satish Sangle), Shasakiya Granthalaya (Vishrambag Wada), library of the S.N.D.T. Women's University (Pune Campus), the National Film Archives of India (and Arati Karkhanis, head of the documentation section, as well as the library staff). In Mumbai: Mumbai Marathi Grantha Sangrahalaya, the Asiatic Society's library, library of the S.N.D.T. Women's University (and the then librarian Dr Sushama Paudwal), and library of the National Centre for the Performing Arts. In Delhi: Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, and library of India International Centre. In Calcutta: the National Library (and Ashim Mukhopadhyaya). In Stockholm, Sweden: the library of the University of Stockholm.

Fortunately I have had the benefit of discussions with various experts and professionals. The salience of music in Marathi theatre led me to practising musicians: the late ethno-musicologist Dr Ashok D. Ranade and Dr Aneesh Pradhan in Mumbai, and Pune's Rajiv Paranjpe who accompanies musical plays on the reed-organ; all these willingly shared with me their wide knowledge of theatre. As a former stage singer–actress, Nirmala Gogate shared valuable information. Among playwrights, Girish Karnad in Bangalore (whose knowledge of Marathi theatre is extensive and who later read the manuscript), the late Dr G.P. Deshpande in Pune, and Suresh Khare in Mumbai have contributed a great deal of information. In Mumbai, Shyam Benegal kindly engaged in telephonic and email discussions about one of his films. An unexpected chance to test my analysis of the difference between a drama and a play-text, pivoting on their ability to accommodate elements of the environment on stage, was offered by Dr Anne Fedhaus and Dr Megha Budruk by inviting me to the

'Fifteenth International Conference on Maharashtra: Culture and Society' focusing on Environment, organised by them at Arizona State University in Phoenix, Arizona, in April 2014.

It was heart-warming to see the enthusiasm with which interested friends, acquaintances, and colleagues – mostly but not only Maharashtrians – entered into discussions about the various topics in the book. They often helped by sharing their memories but also theatre lore, and in practical ways by suggesting useful contacts, and tracing and lending books and other materials. It is not possible to list all of them here but I do appreciate their interest. The most helpful of these include the late Professor Ram Bapat, Dr Sadanand More, Dr Sulabha Brahme, Dr Mangesh Kulkarni, Zameer Kamble, Professor Zia Karim, Abhay Tilak, Vaidehi Mandke (Bal Gandharva's great granddaughter) and Girish Mandke, Rajendra Thakurdesai, Dr Madhavi Kolhatkar, Meenaxi Pawar, Anil Shirole, Ajay Mulay, and Avinash Gadekar of *Sakal* Library in Pune; Rivka Israel, Soniya Khare, Zenobia Dumasia, Dr Rohini Gavankar, and Bazil Shaikh in Mumbai; Dr Tara Bhavalkar in Sangli; and Ramkrishna Naik and Dr Ajay Vaidya in Goa. Professor Romila Thapar hospitably facilitated a meeting of knowledgeable friends in Delhi of whom Sudhanva Deshpande engaged in a vigorous discussion and provided helpful references and Dr Anuradha Kapur read a chapter of this book, offering helpful comments. Professor Partha Chatterjee has also been generous enough to read the manuscript and comment knowledgeably on it, drawing upon his experience of Bengali theatre. Information about the old theatre district in Mumbai was shared by Rafique Zakaria and Deepak Rao in Mumbai, and in Pune by Rajeev Paranjpe and Abhay Jakhade.

Photos were made available by the Archives of Bharat Natya Samshodhan Mandir, M/S A.V. Damle (copyright holders of the films produced by the erstwhile Prabhat Film Company), The National Film Archives of India, Mrs Vandana Khandekar née Bhole, Vikram Gokhale, Kiran Nagarkar, and Aban Mukherji. Kumar Gokhale helped with the digital enhancement of the photos. Some photos have been taken from old books and their sources acknowledged; it has not been possible to establish their copyright.

In Mumbai my old friend Aban Mukherji constituted herself my informal research assistant and located reference materials, translated passages from Gujarati, acquired CDs from friends, and happily trudged along with me to locate the old theatre district.

I am grateful to all these people and institutions, and hope that the finished product resulting from their help answers their expectations. Last but not the least, I would like to thank the editorial team at Routledge, India, for their warm co-operation in publishing this book.

**Meera Kosambi**
Pune, July 2014

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# Introduction

**Plate I:** Picture postcard of the concluding scene from *Sangit Saubhadra* with Balaram (B.P. Kirloskar, centre), Subhadra (Bhaurao Kolhatkar in female dress, left), and Arjun (Moroba Wagholikar, right), c. 1882.[1]

A deeply-etched memory surges up in my mind at the mention of B.P. Kirloskar's iconic *Sangit Saubhadra*, which introduced me to the genre of musical plays at a receptive and impressionable age in the mid-1950s in Mumbai (formerly Bombay).[2] In the expectant pre-performance hush enveloping the open-air arena, we sat facing the red velvet curtain – itself an established metaphor now for

[1] The original photo is available in the archive of Bharat Natya Samshodhan Mandir, but this picture postcard seems more interesting. The play or actors, not mentioned on the postcard, are easily identifiable.

[2] Incidentally the venue was the open air theatre at Kelewadi. The play celebrated its 130th anniversary in 2012.

Marathi theatre – on which was pinned a small garland of fragrant white flowers. A wafting aroma indicated that the hourglass-shaped incense-burner had been carried back and forth across the stage behind the closed curtain.[3] The short ritual worship for the success of the play, ending with the breaking open of a coconut, was obviously completed. Then came the much-awaited tinkling of the brass bell – for the third and final time – again carried back and forth across the stage. An anticipatory mood having effectively been evoked, the lights were dimmed, the curtain parted, and the reed organ struck the opening bars of Sutradhar's *nandi* (*naandi*) or initial musical invocation for divine blessings. And then at once, the audience was transported into a world of musical fantasy.[4]

This is how a classical musical play still begins. The intervening century and a quarter since its inception has witnessed gradual changes – some inevitable and others seemingly avoidable, some smooth and others obtrusive – as five or more long acts are telescoped into fewer short ones. Many songs are omitted; the rest not musically embellished as initially intended, nor encores allowed. The originally nightlong event is compressed into a few evening hours to allow the audiences in Mumbai to catch the last local train to their suburban homes; in Pune to scramble for the few available auto-rickshaws; and those elsewhere to also reach home at a reasonable hour.[5]

Going to the cinema is a less nostalgic experience within the fast-changing physical milieu that frames the screening. Pune's Deccan Talkies, where I saw the rare film as a child sitting in a family box, has given way to yet another high-rise mall, with the two-screen 'R-Deccan' tucked away above the glistening glass frontage of

[3] Pellets of *dhup* were burnt both as a fragrant accompaniment to the worship ritual and to cleanse the air; in very early times it used to be carried through the whole theatre.

[4] The only actor in the show I remember is 'Chhota Gandharva' (Saudagar Gore) as Krishna – the third 'Gandharva' (celestial singer) of the Marathi stage, after Bal Gandharva (Narayanrao Rajhans) and Sawai Gandharva (Rambhau Kundgolkar). The music world has had Kumar Gandharva (Shivaputra Komkalimath).

[5] An older friend could not reconcile herself to our latest viewing of a 'modernised' two-act, three-hour *Saubhadra* in January 2013, accustomed as she was in her younger days to the play starting at 10 p.m. and ending at 5 a.m.

'Kentucky Fried Chicken'. Only two cinema halls in the old part of the city retain the pre-Independence architecture,[6] but with small visible attempts at modernisation: roasted grams and groundnuts are sold in plastic packets instead of paper cones that one strongly associated with the cinema experience at one time, and augmented by more popular fare. However, today one is more likely to watch the latest Marathi (and not just Hindi or English) film in the air-conditioned comfort of a multiplex, munching a variety of popcorn – because of the state government rule mandating the screening of Marathi films in all cinema halls.

Even as musical plays strive to validate their existence by adhering – within material constraints – to their classical origins, films try to distance themselves from theirs, instead emulating the technical sophistication and histrionic finesse (as well as song-and-dance numbers) of 'Bollywood' films – Hindi films produced in Mumbai. Some serious ones train their sights on Hollywood, aiming at an Oscar as the best foreign language film.

Both theatre and cinema have journeyed far from their cultural moorings, which one sometimes grudges them. But, for all this nostalgia, would one really wish to re-live the past if one could? However much I might wish to be enthralled by the legendary Bal Gandharva in his prime and to experience the thrill of viewing a film when it was a forbidden activity for women, would I willingly suspend disbelief to the extent of accepting male actors in female roles – on stage or silver screen? Is a selective re-creation of the past not a pleasanter alternative after all?

But a 'selective re-creation' is not the agenda of the present book: it seeks to capture the fashioning and refashioning of a liminal society in interaction with the entertainment scenario from the mid-1840s to the mid-1940s. It also argues that through a process of osmosis, theatre and cinema – the only 'respectable' public entertainment – transcended this function, especially in urban areas, to elicit an unbelievable degree of involvement so as to form an integral part of culture at the time, in contrast to its extraneous and escapist role today. This study is essentially an exercise in social history, from a gender perspective,

[6] These are Prabhat Talkies and Vijay Talkies: the latter's theatre ancestry surfaces through its official name, 'Limaye Natya Chitra Mandir' or Limaye's Dramatic and Cinema Theatre.

whenever possible; it describes and analyses, but does not attempt to theorise. It discusses stage and film craft minimally, and treats music only briefly, although it was – to rephrase Shakespeare – the 'food' of Marathi theatre and underwent changes with the introduction of recording companies in the early 1900s, followed by All India Radio in the 1920s. The slippages involved in capturing in words the transformation of a play-script through a live performance replete with a profusion of music on a proscenium stage with sets and props of varying sophistication are obvious, albeit unavoidable. This study, thus, focuses on important play-texts and major theatre companies, indicates the valence of music and of female impersonators, and adds the meagre material available about sets and props. Through these it hopes to indicate public preferences and social change.

Almost serendipitously this exploration results in locating the seemingly parochial Marathi entertainment world at the intersection of diverse regional, national, and international cultural streams. Some of these eclectic influences as well as the defining moments in this history are outlined in this Introduction, and form the themes of subsequent chapters. Part One discusses theatre history, important playwrights and their works, the composition of theatre companies, stagecraft, and the gradual creation of a space for women as dramatists and actresses within this hegemonic male world. Part Two traces the trajectory of the young film industry and its female stars whose recorded memoirs describe their entry into and functioning within it.

Undergirding the study are various interlinked themes. In the evolution of dramatic genres I detect a dialectic dynamic operating in response to socially liminal consumers of these offerings and also to colonial modernity and European theatre movements. This modernity is mediated by the hegemonic Brahmin community whose dominance infused theatre with a Sanskrit influence. It also ensured a continuity of enduring mythological and historical motifs – in both of which the community was closely involved as custodians of sacred knowledge and harbouring ambition to regain its former political power. The transition from theatre to cinema involved a rupture that was paradoxically compensated by the continuity of themes and lateral movement of individuals within the existing networks. Also discussed are the contents of drama that endorsed a specific image of women and its actual enactment, which long excluded them while privileging female impersonators.

This last touches upon feminist theatre studies. In India, as in the West, drama was long read as part of literature in academia, without examining performative conditions, audience composition, or the functioning of theatre companies. As Elaine Aston discovered, 'play-texts themselves, [when] "read" as theatrical as opposed to dramatic texts, were seen to contain important information about aspects of their contemporary staging'.[7] In the West, feminist theatre studies have evolved from 'images of women in male-authored drama' to questions about 'how and why women's work has been "hidden" or marginalized'.[8] My agenda necessarily concentrates on the first part because of a paucity of material. One reads enviously of the astounding amplitude of such material in the West. John Russell Brown declares that 'a dramatic text is only the bare bones of a play in performance'; it comes alive only when the available 'abundance of clues' is 'pieced together so that the illusions, pleasures, and innovations of the past can be suggested for a reader and a history of theatre attempted'.[9] But, we have inherited mainly play-texts and drama criticism; 'theatrescapes' have to be jigsawed together by gleaning, from a few memoirs of theatre personalities, stray facts about stagecraft and functioning of theatre companies.

Our broad sweep of a century spans three transitions: related to gender, culture, and performance. The first deals with women (or their long absence) on stage and their reconstructed images in drama; the second with socio-cultural changes shaping entertainment; and the third with actual enactment – from stylised movements to 'natural' acting, and from female impersonators to actresses. Chief among the underlying constants is recreation as the key function of theatre. Western drama made different choices in prioritising either instruction or delight as its main function.[10] Marathi drama invariably settled for delight – as mandated by the *Natyashastra*, the ancient and authoritative Sanskrit text on dramaturgy. Thus tragedy, an intrinsic

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[7] Elaine Aston, *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre*, London: Routledge, 1995, pp. 2–3.

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] John Russell Brown, 'Introduction' in *The Oxford English History of Theatre*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 1.

[10] George W. Brandt, 'Introduction' in *Modern Theories of Drama: A Selection of Writings on Drama and Theatre, 1850–1990*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. xiii–xxii.

part of Western drama since classical Greece, was largely avoided. Music remained integral to theatre even when it attempted to promote social realism. Despite the occasional 'new movement', no original theory of drama was developed. All this is either highlighted or just glimpsed in the present overview, contingent upon the available material.

## Defining Moments of Marathi Theatre and Cinema

The century-long evolutionary phases of theatre and cinema are open to various interpretations; I read them as a clear dialectic dynamic.

Although colonial modernity was the provenance of 19th-century literature and drama, the first 'modern' Marathi play, a foundational event in 1843 (just 25 years after the region's colonisation with the end of Peshwa rule), was a stylised mythological ensconced within a pre-modern paradigm. This was Vishnudas Bhave's *Sita-svayamvar* performed in Sangli in south Maharashtra, inspired by neighbouring Karnataka's *yakshagan* folk theatre. Vishnudas's later encounter with Mumbai's European theatre drew his performances occasionally from the private, residence-based sphere into the commercial orbit of ticketed transactions that revolutionised the nature of patronage, even as the content remained traditional. The 'formula' of the mythological was the enactment of an epical episode by male actors impersonating gods, demons, and the wives of both, sages, as well as mortal men and women. They mimed actions to the verse narrative sung by a *sutradhar* (literally the string-puller) who generally stage-managed the show with his companion, the ubiquitous *vidushak* or jester. Itinerant troupes carried this cultural phenomenon to a wide Marathi-speaking area outside the current state boundaries to what I term the 'greater cultural Maharashtra', creating an audience with homogeneous tastes.

But in a clash of cultures the younger English-educated men launched an antithesis to these low-brow performances through the new genre of prose plays to signal an emphatic rupture. Improvisation gave way to a published text regarded as a work of literature. In a latent cultural tussle, Kalidas and Shakespeare vied for supremacy as source texts for translation and adaptation – serving as symbols either of a nationalistically reinvented tradition or of a newly created

Westernised tradition. Historical themes reclaimed the glorious Maratha past even as social themes transferred the conflicted social reform discourse to the theatre arena.[11] Thus a new mass medium with a vast outreach was created and discursively deployed for social and political purposes, effectively secularising theatre.

A synthesis of the two emerged as the next defining moment – the musical play or *sangit natak*. Now Kalidas was ushered in by B.P. Kirloskar in a 'musicalised' Marathi garb through *Sangit Shakuntal* (1880) at Pune, adding raga-based songs to a meticulous translation of the Sanskrit original. This tradition produced relatively well-crafted 'modern' plays – or revived an ancient tradition to suit modern tastes – with dialogues and songs delivered by the actors themselves, and brought classical music within the purview of the common man. The tradition was kept alive by Kirloskar Company and its numerous followers through a succession of eminent singer–actors and prolific playwrights. These companies also toured the greater cultural Maharashtra and created a homogeneous and long-lasting taste for musical plays. The heyday of musical plays – with the all-male cast being dominated by skilled female impersonators, such as Bal Gandharva – lasted until seriously challenged by the emergent 'talkies' of the 1930s.

But the dialectic continued: a tussle between the musical play and the neglected prose play prompted the synthesis of a new paradigm of social realism to combat the competition from the 'talkies'. The group 'Natya Manwantar' (1933) ushered in a 'new era in theatre' as its name proclaimed. This band of talented writers, actors, and directors in Mumbai looked beyond England to the continent and responded eagerly to Scandinavian drama, especially Ibsen. Far-reaching changes, such as socially relevant contemporary themes, tight plots, and careful characterisation were now attempted, with the inescapable concession to the audience demand for songs (albeit in a much-pruned format). The company was succeeded by 'Natya Niketan' in 1940, run along similar lines but with a diluted ideological engagement and greater concessions to popular taste. Simultaneously,

[11] The word 'Maratha' is used in this study mainly to denote a precolonial historical period; in the modern context it indicates a large, non-Brahmin caste. The word 'Marathi' denotes a language and cannot be employed as a short substitute for 'Maharashtrian', as some erroneously do.

humour was privileged by others as the mainstay of drama in the 1930s and 1940s.

The emergence of cinema as the new medium of culture and entertainment constituted the final defining moment. D.G. Phalke's debut silent film, *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), made in Mumbai, inspired similar ventures. Prabhat Film Company's first talkie, *Ayodhyecha Raja* (1932) directed by V. Shantaram, re-engaged with the same mythological theme, in a quick response to Hollywood's new sound technology. But it was Prabhat's social commitment – ranging from women's emancipation to religious integration – that became legendary. Importantly, cinema imbricated with theatre at several points, and even absorbed some stage actors who earned varying degrees of success.

Through all this, the inter-relationship of gender and performance remained a site of contestation. Women continued to be assiduously excluded from theatre as any kind of 'agents' – either as playwrights or actresses, but they made small inroads in both capacities in the early 20th century. Indeed the ideology of women's right to play female roles was consciously promoted from the late 1920s and the era of female impersonators began to die a natural death a decade later. Cinema followed suit with a slight time lag, progressing from Phalke's reliance on female impersonators (belying our 'modern' notion of the camera's candid gaze) to Prabhat's induction of actresses in female roles as a commitment to realism. Prabhat's policy of shooting most films in both Marathi and Hindi versions widened their outreach to the whole subcontinent.

During this period theatre and cinema projected, often consciously, images of the 'average', 'ideal', and 'new' woman. At variance with these was the subjective reality of women in general and specifically of those who straddled the two media. This latter, scripted in some actress-authored life-stories, documents their life in the entertainment world which had thus far been constructed as a project of men, by men, and for men.

## The Antecedent Infrastructure

In his foundational event Vishnudas self-avowedly conflated the prevalent spectrum from the 'low' or folk forms to the 'high' Sanskrit drama. His acknowledged familiarity with these undeniably enriched his creations.

*Folk Entertainment*

The semi-religious prototypes for rudimentary dramatic performances had existed for centuries, elaborating upon widely-known mythological episodes.[12] Universally popular were shows with wooden or cloth puppets mentioned in the works of the late-13th-century devotional poet Sant Dnyaneshwar. Equally attractive were a variety of night-time, torch-lit performances which included impersonations – of Vishnu's 10 incarnations (in *dashavatar*), of deities and their miracles (in *lalit*s), or of secular characters (by *bahurupi*s). More ubiquitous and didactic was the usually temple-based *kirtan*, a prose discourse punctuated by religious songs, whose format was a natural precursor of the musical play.[13] Kirtans – sometimes based on narrative compositions (*akhyan*s) by renowned poets – have retained great popularity from the 17th century to the present.

Rhythmic song and dance narratives (*gondhal*s) performed as prayers to a specific goddess were – and still are – used for celebrating occasions like weddings in rural areas. Gradually there emerged a class of *shahir*s (from the Persian '*shair*' or poet) who composed heroic ballads (*povada*s) from the time of Shivajiraje in the mid-17th century until the end of the Peshwai in 1818 and even beyond, offering overtly non-religious entertainment for the first time. They sang of heroes and their exploits – either of bygone days or of the present – when those in power commissioned such works.[14] Some of the shahirs also wrote *lavani*s, short and compact songs that dealt imaginatively with emotions – mainly romantic or erotic love – with great sophistication. The lavanis often commented on contemporary events, and some were set to classical raga tunes and made into a form of concert music.[15] Generous patronage from the last two Peshwas attracted many lavani composers to Pune, but the genre developed in the rest of Maharashtra as well. Its appeal was interestingly widespread: it travelled with the Bhosle Rajas to Tanjore where members of the royal family continued to compose them.

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[12] This sub-section is based largely on Vishwanath Pandurang Dandekar, *Marathi Natya-srishti*, Khanda 1: *Pauranik Natake*, Badode: V.P. Dandekar, 1941, pp. 28–64.

[13] N.G. Joshi, 'Sphuta Kavye' in R.S. Jog (ed.), *Marathi Vangmayacha Itihas*, Khanda 3, Pune: Maharashtra Sahitya Parishad, 1999 (1973), pp. 351–54.

[14] P.N. Joshi, 'Shahiri Vangmaya – Povade' in *ibid.*, pp. 405–42.

[15] G.N. Morje, 'Shahiri Vangmaya – Lavani' in *ibid.*, p. 469.

The *tamasha* (from the Urdu word for a performance) shot into prominence in the last phase of the Peshwai and came to signify a specific genre: starting with an initial invocation to Ganesh, followed by songs about Krishna and his milkmaids, a few erotic lavanis, and finally a short prose-and-verse drama. It was a popular entertainment in cities and villages, at the Peshwa's court and among the Maratha troops. Female impersonators gradually gave way to women dancers whose provocative movements constituted the tamasha's main appeal, making it less than respectable. Thus, ironically, the only public entertainment which provided women artistes a space was branded vulgar, while 'respectable' entertainment allowed no space for women.

That historically the elite and folk forms of entertainment were not distinct is shown by an interesting document from 1783, which describes a five-day Holi celebration by Peshwa Sawai Madhavrao at his principal palace, Shaniwar Wada at Pune.[16] The festivities featured wooden puppet shows, mimes, and tamashas by various troupes – some with boys in female dress and some with dancing girls, accompanied by a male lavani-singer, and players of a tambourine and a one-stringed instrument.

Literary references testify to the longevity of these forms of entertainment, frequently coupled with explicitly derogatory references to actors. The question arises as to why dramatic compositions failed to emerge within the rich tradition of verse literature before the 1840s. One favourite, albeit unconvincing, answer is that the heavily otherworldly mindset of the poets precluded the creation of mundane entertainment, and that a change was wrought only by contact with the 'worldly' British culture.

### *Marathi Theatre — Outside Maharashtra*

Surprisingly, there existed a parallel tradition of Marathi stylised mythologicals unknown to Maharashtra until the turn of the 20th century. Created by the Bhosle Rajas of Tanjore, a dynasty founded by Shahaji's son Vyankoji (stepbrother of Shivajiraje), this tradition continued independently in a Marathi cultural island in the South, broadly from about 1680 to 1850.[17] Of the prolific Tanjore kings,

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[16] Dandekar, *Pauranik Natake*, pp. 38–39.

[17] R.S. Jog, 'Tanjavar Yethil Natya-vangmaya' in *Marathi Vangmayacha Itihas*, Khanda 3, pp. 476–89; Maya Sardesai, *Bharatiya Rangabhumichi Parampara*, Pune: Snehavardhan Prakashan, 1996, pp. 9–22; Dandekar, *Pauranik Natake*, pp. 19–27.

Shahuraje (or Shahraj) composed about 20 yakshagan plays in Telugu and 22 in Marathi (of which eight are extant) – thus becoming the first Marathi playwright. Some of Shahuraje's descendants, including Ekoji and Sarfoji also wrote Marathi plays.

It was Shahuraje who first identified his composition, *Lakshmi-Narayan-kalyan* (The wedding of Lakshmi and Vishnu), as a 'natak', although it is essentially a long musical narration by the sutradhar who describes all the incidents in the story and also announces the entry and exit of the characters and explains their actions. The Marathi text is interspersed with occasional, spontaneous Telugu words and phrases.[18] Another play, *Sita-kalyan*, essayed by both Shahuraje and Pratapsinh, was possibly performed at Sangli by the yakshagan troupe of Karnataka (which subsumed Tanjore at the time) and inspired Vishnudas's debut, judging by their resemblance.[19]

Another claim to precedence is made by Goa or Gomantak whose rich dramatic tradition bore a strong – albeit unacknowledged – similarity to Vishnudas's productions. The Goan voice is raised by J.S. Sukhthankar who contests Vishnudas's claim to being 'Maharashtra's first playwright' on the grounds that his dashavatar performances, labelled 'mythological plays', were pre-empted by similar but superior performances routinely held in Goa for centuries.[20] Sukhthankar sees this as a deliberate neglect of Goa by Maharashtrians through Othering born of regional pride (or even chauvinism). In the resultant controversy, the opposing faction led by Maharashtrian theatre historians A.V. Kulkarni and S.N. Banahatti asserts that the process worked in reverse and declares Vishnudas to be the creator of the first 'independent, self-sufficient' play in western India.[21] Sukhthankar's persuasive conclusion identifies first Tanjore and then Goa as claimants to the honour of having founded Marathi theatre.[22] (He seems to discount the possibility – advanced especially by Maya Sardesai – that the Tanjore tradition travelled to both Goa

[18] The contents of the play are described in Jog, 'Tanjavar Yethil Natya-vangmaya', pp. 482–84.

[19] Sardesai, *Bharatiya Rangabhumichi Parampara*, p. 20.

[20] Jagannath Sadashiv Sukhthankar, *Rupadi: Gomantakache Natya-swarup*, Mumbai: The Goa Hindu Association, 1970.

[21] Shriniwas Narayan Banahatti, *Marathi Rangabhumicha Itihas* (*1843-79*), Pune: Vinas Prakashan, 1957, pp. 68–90.

[22] Sukhthankar, *Rupadi*, p. 131.

and other regions through the conduit of itinerant Kannada theatre troupes.)[23]

*Sanskrit Drama*

The educated mind was definitively shaped by the *Natyashastra*, supposedly received by the sage Bharat as *Natya-veda*, a fifth veda, from Brahma, the god of creation.[24] The extant *Natyashastra* was probably written down over a long period from the 6th century B.C. to the 2nd century A.D. Its basic conventions long continued to inform the creation and critiques of Marathi drama, because most of the playwrights, being Brahmins, were trained in Sanskrit, and some had additionally studied Sanskrit drama as part of their college curriculum.

The text treats drama as a dedication and worship offered to a deity to invoke blessings for general welfare and happiness – what Kalidas called a 'visual sacrificial offering' to the gods. It recognises a play as a co-ordinated team-work of the playwright, producer–director, actors, musicians, and men working behind the scenes. Drama is thus essentially a form of recreation, a temporary escape from the grind of daily life, through the spectacle presented on the stage, accompanied by sparkling, literary dialogue as well as music and dance. In Kalidas's famous words, it is the one recreation that appeals to a variety of tastes. Bharat himself called it 'a representational statement of the emotional states of the entire triple world [of gods, demons, and mortals]'. This representation or imitation is achieved through an intricate plot and suitable acting. This last is unique to drama, because an actor conveys to the spectator the emotional richness of literature through appropriate make-up, costume, gestures, and dialogue delivery.

Bharat's guidelines require the plot to be a famous story. Most Sanskrit plays drew upon mythology, history, legend, and folklore; the playwright's genius lay not in inventing the plot but in re-interpreting it (as with Shakespeare). Each act was a complete, one-scene unit, at the end of which all characters on the stage exited. Two acts were at times joined together by a short bridge scene to ensure a smooth narrative flow. Bharat categorised plays as the medium-length natak (with five–seven acts), the longer *prakaran* (10 acts), the shorter *natika*

[23] Sardesai, *Bharatiya Rangabhumichi Parampara*, p. 11.

[24] This sub-section is based primarily on G.K. Bhat, *Sanskrit Drama: A Perspective on Theory and Practice*, Dharwar: Karnatak University, 1975.

(four acts), and the very short, frequently comic *prahasan* (which dealt with lower-level social life in one or two acts, and resembled a farce). In the absence of sets, props, and drop-curtains, a change of scene was indicated by an actor walking around the stage in a circle. The only curtain used was at the back of the stage, covering two openings – for the entry and the exit of the actors.

A play's format was bracketed with prayers to underscore the religious dimension of the otherwise secular and pleasurable experience. The preliminaries included the singing of the opening benediction (nandi) to the beat of drums to attract an audience to a public performance, a prologue by the sutradhar, and the seating of the musicians at the back of the stage. Then followed a musical presentation of the sutradhar's ritual worship of the stage and his introduction of the play and its author, with an appeal to the spectators for a favourable reception. The actual play then commenced, to be concluded with a *Bharat-vakya* – either a statement in honour of Bharat, or a joint statement by all the actors still in costume and make-up to thank the audience.

The story usually revolved around a hero of noble birth and exalted status, and his quest for his beloved, also of noble birth (or, as an exception, a highly accomplished courtesan). The path of true love predictably did not run smooth, but the hero was able – frequently with help from his companion who was a variation of the vidushak – to overcome them and achieve a happy ending. The play evoked various emotional states (*bhava*s) and sentiments or moods (*rasa*s) as part of the aesthetic experience. The primary rasas are *shringar* (erotic), *raudra* (furious), *vir* (valorous) and *bibhatsa* (disgusting); the secondary rasas they produce are *hasya* (laughter-provoking), *karun* (pathos-inducing), *adbhut* (miraculous), and *bhayanak* (terrifying). All these were expressed through *abhinaya* or acting, which included gestures, vocalisation, and facial expressions. Some dance movements were also deployed as miming devices (as for example, riding a chariot).

Bharat's idea of a good drama inevitably occluded social realism (given the exalted protagonist), formal tragedy (because recreation demanded a happy ending), or pure comedy (humour being relegated to the occasional farce). Also forbidden were depictions of war or death on stage, along with private acts such as eating, sleeping, or manifestation of sexual passion.

The Sanskrit dialogue was mostly prose, interspersed with verses rhythmically recited in the specified poetic metres, except when

instructions indicated actual singing. The dramatic characters were divided into three categories – the high category included the hero, divine characters, and great sages; the middle category included ministers, priests, etc.; and the low category included all women (even the royal heroine), maids, servants, and the jester. The placement of women in the low category did not suggest a lack of education or refinement on their part; the queens and princesses certainly possessed these, as reflected in their conversation and witticisms. It stemmed basically from the patriarchal, polygamous society that accorded women a subsidiary status. While the first two categories spoke Sanskrit, the third spoke Prakrit, the audience being familiar with both.[25]

Along with the writing and performance of drama, the *Natyashastra* also provides guidelines for the construction and architecture of playhouses. Some ruins of such old playhouses have also been unearthed.[26]

## The Ever-present Maratha Past as Inspiration

Maharashtrians tend to mentally linger in the more recent Maratha history starting with the birth of Shivajiraje in about 1630 to the end of the Peshwai in 1818 – an event still within living memory in the late 19th century. A gold mine for playwrights, novelists, and later for film-makers, Maratha lore formed the dominant patriotic and nationalist subtext of the cultural narrative.

In the political realm, the desire for self-rule was an attempt to retrieve Maratha power, most explicitly articulated by the 'Extremist' political leader B.G. Tilak. His claim for 'swaraj as my birth-right', primarily a slogan for national independence, can also be read as a reclaiming of the lost (Brahmin) Peshwa patrimony.[27] This nostalgia

[25] This received interpretation is, however, contested by Shonaleeka Kaul in *Imagining the Urban: Sanskrit and the City in Early India*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2010, pp. 21–31.

[26] For a description with photos and diagrams, see Ananda Lal (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Indian Theatre*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 16–20.

[27] This point is explicated in Meera Kosambi, 'Gender and Nationalism' in *Crossing Thresholds: Feminist Essays in Social History*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007, pp. 204–33 (especially p. 217).

of a colonial subject is stressed by Tilak's journalist–associate V.K. Bhave:

> At present we lead arid and troubled lives in this period of subjection. The sorrows of such a life can be overcome by studying Maratha history. As one immerses oneself in it, one merges with that brave era peopled by valorous individuals, and one's heart is filled with sublime passions.[28]

These 'sublime passions' inspired numerous important plays which this brief overview seeks to contextualise – not with historical accuracy but with simplification and romanticisation which shape the popular imaginary. The greatest Maratha hero is undisputedly Chhatrapati Shivaji, son of Shahaji Bhosle. With a band of peasants groomed into an efficient guerrilla army, he began carving out a Maratha kingdom in the Muslim-dominated western India in the mid-17th century and was ceremonially crowned in 1674 at the age of 44, six years before his untimely death. (Two episodes in his life have lent themselves to easy dramatisation: his killing of the Mughal envoy Afzalkhan at Pune, and his escape from brief Mughal captivity at Agra along with his young son Sambhaji.)[29] After succeeding him, Sambhajiraje ruled for a few troubled years and was captured and killed by Aurangzeb. When his young son Shahu was taken as a prisoner to Agra, Sambhaji's younger brother Rajaram was installed as Chhatrapati at Kolhapur. Shahu was released after Aurangzeb's death in 1707 and invested as Maratha king. With his choice of Satara as his capital, the two royal branches provided dual power centres. Shahu's administration was carried out by his Brahmin prime minister or Peshwa. The first eminent Peshwa, Bajirao I, inherited the office in 1720 and set up a dynastic rule that lasted a hundred years. Pune, his seat, and the growing Maratha territories flourished under his son Nanasaheb until Maratha power was brutally arrested at Panipat by Ahmadshah Abdali in 1761.

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[28] Vasudev Krishna Bhave, *Peshwekalin Maharashtra*, New Delhi: Indian Council for Historical Research, 1976 (1936), p. xi. Bhave worked for Tilak's *Kesari* for 20 years.

[29] The most spectacular and hagiographical play about Shivajiraje is Babasaheb Purandare's contemporary *Jaanataa Raja* performed on a grand scale, with a cast numbering 150, and with elephants, horses, and camels in occasional processions.

Nanasaheb's son Madhavrao the Elder rebuilt Maratha power and simultaneously curbed his ambitious uncle Raghunathrao alias Raghoba who, as Nanasaheb's younger brother, wanted to stake a claim to Peshwaship. After Madhavrao's early death by consumption, his younger brother Narayanrao became Peshwa, but fell prey to Raghoba's 'vaulting ambition' – or his wife Anandibai's scheming on his behalf, in popular perception – and was killed on the latter's orders. Raghoba's stint as Peshwa was short-lived and he was ousted by a conspiracy of a group of statesmen who invested Narayanrao's posthumously-born infant son Madhavrao as Peshwa Sawai Madhavrao, while Nana Phadnis (or Phadnavis) administered the state on his behalf. Young Madhavrao is alleged to have committed suicide to escape Nana's dictatorial discipline.

Power then devolved upon Bajirao II, Raghoba's son, who became infamous as the effete and decadent Peshwa who lost the Maratha Empire to the English East India Company in 1818. The Company had by then built up its naval power along the west coast of India from its island stronghold of Mumbai (having entrenched itself in Bengal half a century earlier and Madras a couple of decades earlier). The Company had captured Gujarat's vast maritime trade and diverted it to Mumbai, before entering the arena of Peshwa politics. The defeated Peshwa was exiled to Brahmavarta (or Bithoor) near Kanpur in North India and his dominions were annexed to form the core of the Bombay Presidency. His descendant Nanasaheb Peshwa was the nominal figurehead under whose banner the Maratha Rani of Jhansi led the armed uprising of 1857.

The Maratha Confederacy, headed by the Peshwa, which had earlier controlled a large part of India had included Gaikwad of Baroda, Shinde (Scindia) of Gwalior, Holkar of Indore, and Bhosle of Nagpur. After 1818 their truncated dominions were nominally autonomous under the supervision of British Political Agents and served as notable outposts of the former Maratha power.

Within Maharashtra, Satara state was liquidated in 1848. Kolhapur continued to function longer, and had an enlightened and reform-oriented chief, Shahu Maharaj, who ruled from the late 19th century onward. The small princely states in south Maharashtra such as Sangli, Miraj, and Ichalkaranji, were known collectively as the Southern Maratha Jagirs (because they originated in the *jahagir*s granted by the Peshwas to his – Brahmin – Sardars) and also extended valuable patronage to Marathi theatre, literature, and arts.

The multiple Brahmin hegemony – ritual, political, and military – resulting from Peshwa rule survived under the British Raj, enjoying public leadership and cultural power, as reflected in Marathi literature, drama, and even the formation of theatre companies, with Pune as its heartland.

## Middle Class Gravitation to Theatre

The mainstay of theatre was the burgeoning upper-caste middle class, although the audiences spanned a wide spectrum from princes, rich urban nobility and rural landlords, to the urban working class. This was an enormously wide outreach, especially as privately organised performances on makeshift stages with limited audiences gave way to regular ticketed performances in large theatres by touring drama companies.

The formation of the middle class under British rule started in the mid-19th century. The upheaval caused by the loss of Peshwa power threatened to demolish the old social order by cancelling state-sponsored privileges and economic opportunities to Brahmins, and negating the salience of traditional, religious education. A traumatic couple of decades later, the Company government sought to stabilise and strengthen its military–administrative control of the area, and systematically introduce Western education which became the sole avenue of employment under the new dispensation.

But this change left Brahmin leadership intact in the field of education (as the traditional literati), and therefore also in social, cultural, and later political, spheres. Western education resulted in a vast expansion of white collar workers, professionals (school and college teachers, lawyers, medical doctors), and lower echelons of the bureaucracy and judiciary. This signalled the creation of a new middle class aware of its spearheading role in social transition. The generations that emerged from this educational regimen espoused relatively liberal views regarding gender-related practices, and led to the social, and later political, reform movement.

The elite among the upper-caste middle class was the new English-educated intelligentsia also steeped in Sanskrit learning, and versed equally in Kalidas and Shakespeare. Coupled with the patriotic ambition of retrieving the Sanskrit literary heritage and enriching Marathi language and literature, this resulted in a spate of translations from Sanskrit and English. Interestingly, Sanskrit conventions

initially had a deep impact on musical plays, and the Western ones on prose plays.

The intelligentsia appropriated leadership of theatre as both dramatists and discerning spectators. But the enormous and economically diverse potential audiences shared an informed interest in what naturally came to constitute the favourite themes of drama – mythology, history, social reform, and nationalism.

The popularity of theatre led also to a craze for forming amateur theatre groups in a city like Pune, as seen from H.N. Apte's evocative description in his debut novel *Madhali Sthiti* (The Transitional Phase, 1885).[30] Actor Ganpatrao Bodas mentions several amateur theatre clubs in various parts of Pune, in at least three of which he had participated as a schoolboy. Schools and colleges also staged plays as part of their annual social gatherings; and most theatre companies kept agents in large towns and cities partly to enlist good looking young boys for female roles.[31]

By the turn of the 20th century, the average Maharashtrian had 'a craze for plays in his bones and politics in his blood', says actress Durga Khote.

> Theatre was an important facet of public life at the time – an active graph of the country's politics and social progress. Eminent leaders, public speakers, citizens, and wealthy merchants were theatre patrons and were also regarded as devotees of art, and well-wishers and guides of theatre companies. Princes and aristocrats considered it an asset to have theatre companies under their patronage. Marathi theatre was famed for its superior entertainment, but it was undergirded by social and political engagement as well.[32]

The late 19th century also witnessed a resurgence of public interest in Hindustani classical music, centring on the prosperous and cosmopolitan city of Mumbai.[33] It started nationalistically as a

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[30] Hari Narayan Apte, *Madhali Sthiti*, Pune: A.V. Patwardhan, 1929 (1885).

[31] G.G. Bodas, *Majhi Bhumika*, Pune: Vinas Book Stall, 1964 (1940), pp. 17–24.

[32] Durga Khote, *Mi – Durga Khote*, Mumbai: Majestic Book Stall, 1982, p. 53.

[33] Aneesh Pradhan, 'Perspectives on Performance Practice: Hindustani Music in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Bombay (Mumbai)', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 3, December 2004, pp. 339–58.

revival of India's 'glorious past' and percolated to the middle class through its systematic promotion by music clubs and circles. The first 'Maharashtrian' music circle was 'Deval Club' of Kolhapur (1893) where members met every evening to enjoy musical fare. It afforded opportunities to amateurs; later on professionals were also invited to perform there.[34] But Parsi music circles of Mumbai had pre-empted the club, as will be seen. Besides, famous professional musicians from the families of hereditary musicians and female entertainers from North India were drawn to Mumbai. Within a matter of decades others took to a serious study of music, and the social stigma attached to singing in public began to decline. Meanwhile familiarity with Hindustani classical music radiated from Mumbai to the rest of Maharashtra.

## Public Leadership and the New Mass Medium

The vast outreach of theatre as a mass medium predictably prompted public leaders to deploy it for disseminating social and political messages. The latter half of the 19th century witnessed two pioneering reformers who proceeded along divergent axes: 'Lokahitavadi' Gopal Hari Deshmukh voiced Brahmin concerns (including those about gender justice) and the non-Brahmin Jotirao (or Jotiba) Phule championed mainly the rights of the lower castes and untouchables.[35] Phule attempted to deploy drama as a polemical tool through his play *Tritiya Ratna* (The Third Gem, 1853) which, however, was long obscured, as will be seen.

The mainstream reform discourse, being upper-caste, was monopolised by Brahmins. Its second phase, from the 1870s onward, was dominated by largely pro-British liberals, especially Justice M.G. Ranade, Dr R.G. Bhandarkar, and Justice K.T. Telang. Ranade wrote admiringly of some 10 Marathi plays as classics worthy of inclusion in the university curriculum, in his 'Note on the Growth of Marathi

[34] Govind S. Tembe, *Maza Sangit-vyasang*, Vaman Hari Deshpande (ed.), Mumbai: Maharashtra Rajya Sahitya Sanskriti Mandal, 1984 (1939), p. 52.

[35] For a detailed discussion of the social and political reform movement, see Kosambi, 'Introduction' and 'Gender and Nationalism' in *Crossing Thresholds*, pp. 1–66, 204–33.

Literature' (1898).[36] This note is an interesting exercise in promoting Marathi literature in Mumbai's college and university curricula, chiefly because of his regional pride balanced against admiration for English literature. Some of these Marathi works inevitably bore the stamp of their English models, representing 'the points of contact between the ancient and the modern, the East and the West', though the original Marathi creations represented 'the genius of the nation' in drama and other genres.[37] In the field of drama Ranade welcomed three recent developments: the 'sensation' created by Vishnudas's stage representation catering to 'public amusement'; the 'high class music and singing' added by Kirloskar and his followers; and plays on social and political subjects. In the list of 250 plays prepared by the Registrar of native publications, almost 100 were 'devoted to non-mythic' subjects (including successfully staged translations of Shakespeare), while others 'represent[ed] the stirring events of Maratha History', and the greater part portrayed the conflict between the reformers and the orthodox (with the latter dominating).[38]

The third phase of reform was initiated by B.G. Tilak and G.G. Agarkar who were mentored by the famous essayist and militant nationalist Vishnushastri Chiplunkar, and who started in 1881 the influential weeklies: *Kesari* (Marathi) and *The Mahratta* (English). But a split soon appeared, with Tilak championing political reform to the exclusion of social concerns and Agarkar privileging the latter. Agarkar's interest in theatre was largely limited to his translation of *Hamlet* (regarded as the standard). But Tilak inspired popular playwrights such as K.P. Khadilkar, *Kesari*'s assistant editor, with political militancy and N.B. Kanitkar with social conservatism; he

[36] M.G. Ranade, 'A Note on the Growth of Marathi Literature, 1898' in *The Miscellaneous Writings of the Late Hon'ble Mr. Justice M.G. Ranade*, Bombay: Ramabai Ranade, 1915, pp. 12–56.

[37] *Ibid.*, p. 39.

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 41. In the final list of Marathi books that Ranade prepared with inputs from eminent Maharashtrians (including university graduates) for submission to the Vice-Chancellor of Bombay University, he included 10 Marathi plays: Kirloskar's *Shakuntal*, Deval's *Kadambari*, V.J. Kirtane's *Thorle Madhavrao Peshwe* and *Jayapal*, Agarkar's *Vikar Vilasit* (or *Hamlet*), Kelkar's *Tratika* (or *Taming of the Shrew*), and four of Parshurampant Godbole's translations from the Sanskrit (*Mrichchha-katik*, *Vikramorvashiya*, *Venisamhar*, and *Uttar Ramacharit*).

also took a keen interest in the iconic Kirloskar Company and some of its actors.

After Tilak's death in 1920, Gandhi won a wide following in Maharashtra, although a tension between the two ideologies remained, and still remains, palpable. While some like Khadilkar crossed over to Gandhism, others like N.C. Kelkar and V.D. Savarkar attacked the ideology of non-violence through speeches, essays, and plays.

The involvement of public leaders in theatre began in Mumbai in the 1840s when Jagannath Shankarshet (formerly Jugonnath Sunkersett), the city's sole Maharashtrian merchant prince, constructed Grant Road Theatre.[39] His pioneering achievement is unfortunately often elided, with credit given to the British or the Parsis. Closely associated with him was Dr Bhau Daji Lad, the city's best-known and philanthropic physician.[40] As the undisputed leaders of Mumbai's Marathi-speaking community, they were involved in the city's major civic and cultural initiatives. In 1853 Shankarshet became chairman of the theatre committee. He and Bhau Daji encouraged the young Marathi (and other vernacular) theatre as a desideratum of respectable public recreation, along European lines. They supported Vishnudas's debut in Mumbai in 1853; eminent citizens in Pune and other cities similarly offered help.

But this support did not dispel the strong prejudice against actors – Vishnudas was almost ostracised in the 1840s in Sangli. Distaste was expressed by the refined for the lowbrow fare served by some actors whose loose lifestyle was considered beyond the pale of accepted morality. Mumbai's highly respected and progressive school teacher, Govind Narayan Madgavkar, critiqued severely and at length the 'newfangled' theatre craze in his pioneering description of Mumbai (1863). He bemoaned local residents' excessive interest in plays. Refuting the 'strange belief' that 'theatre leads to improvement and reform', he contrasted the 'learned dramatists' of England and

[39] Purushottam Balkrishna Kulkarni, *Na. Nana Shankarshet Yanche Charitra: Kal va Kamgiri*, Mumbai: P.B. Kulkarni, 1959. Jagannath (alias Nana) was the son of Shankarshet; his family name Murkute was not used, that being the prevalent custom in Maharashtra. He belonged to the Daivadnya or Sonar caste.

[40] Anant Kakba Priolkar, *Doktar Bhau Daji: Vyakti, Kaal va Kartritva*, Mumbai: Mumbai Marathi Sahitya Sangha, 1971.

ancient Sanskrit dramatists whose works 'enhance knowledge' with the current, 'usually illiterate' local playwrights whose plays 'contain mostly farcical pranks'. His condemnation of the ubiquitous 'dashavatar performances' clearly alludes to Vishnudas-style shows. His final charge is that all scriptures censure acting as a profession and that the allure of theatre leads young boys astray.[41] In order to rectify this, Madgavkar himself pioneered short didactic plays.

Even as late as in 1881, the same prejudice was indignantly aired in the liberal Anglo-Marathi weekly *Indu-Prakash* (17 October) through a Marathi letter from a reader in Pune, who signed himself *Natak-shatru* or 'enemy of theatre':

> Sir, the amusing thing in Pune these days is that anyone who wants to achieve greatness dresses up as an actor on stage, anyone who wishes to gain fame puts his signature to the advertisement of a play, anyone who wants to be regarded as respectable keeps company with actors … In brief, who is respectable in Pune these days? An actor. Who is great? An actor. Who is learned? An actor! The very same persons who were not even allowed to approach respectable people a few years ago are now being feted! … O good people of Mumbai, this [theatre] company will soon arrive in Mumbai to extract money from you. Before taking leave of you, I request you not to squander your money [on these shows] but to use it well, and not to encourage such a vile profession'.[42]

Another reader wrote in Marathi to the same paper about this time (31 October 1881), complaining that young men are neglecting worthy causes of social reform to involve themselves in 'organising plays – which are after all a form of tamasha'.[43]

It was at this juncture, on the cusp of the paradigm shift, that Agarkar penned his defence of theatre in a long article in *Kesari*.[44] He emphatically endorsed theatre performances as a source of public recreation, provided they are translations or adaptations of Sanskrit or English plays, or otherwise maintain a high standard and do not adversely affect public morality. He defended Kirloskar Company

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[41] Govind Narayan Madgavkar, *Mumbaiche Varnan*, N.R. Phatak (ed.), Mumbai: Mumbai Marathi Grantha-sangrahalaya, 1961 (1863), pp. 299–300.

[42] Cited in Dandekar, *Pauranik Natake*, pp. 14–15.

[43] *Ibid.*, p. 15.

[44] G.G. Agarkar, 'Natake Karavit Ki Karu Nayet', *Kesari*, 29 November, 13 and 20 December 1881.

against the charge of exorbitant ticketing by supporting music as integral to good entertainment, deserving of public patronage, and worthy of support from the learned.

## British Bombay's Non-Marathi Theatre Scene

The tiny, initially vulnerable island of Mumbai or 'Bombay' which was the East India Company's commercial outpost was catapulted in 1818 into a British political stronghold and gradually a centre of Western education, culture as well as industry.[45] It was thus the premier site of the East–West encounter in western India – a 'contact zone', to borrow Mary Louise Pratt's term, though initially it was an important precolonial contact zone.[46] Here co-existed with the Company's British merchants the mercantile communities of Gujarat – Parsis, Hindus, Jains, and Muslims – induced by the Company to settle in Mumbai to build up its trade. The local and immigrant Maharashtrian population partly supplied agricultural and industrial labour, and partly formed professionals and the intelligentsia. This ethnic diversity was considerably augmented by diverse communities that gravitated to the city, such as Armenian and Baghdadi Jews, Goan converts to Roman Catholicism, and Jewish Bene-Israelis and Muslims from Konkan. The rest of the subcontinent also sent a flow of migrants to the city. This cosmopolitanism was reflected in the city's public and cultural life across the divides of language, religion, caste, and sometimes even race.

To assert their hegemonic status, the British (or 'Europeans' as they preferred to inclusively call themselves) attempted to symbolically recreate their own culture in this alien land, adding a theatre in the mid-1770s to their social and leisure-time activities of dinner parties and balls, excursions and hunts. It was built by subscription and centrally located on part of the 'Bombay Green', the open space

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[45] The discussion of the history of Mumbai and Pune here is based on Meera Kosambi, *Bombay and Poona: A Socio-Ecological Study of Two Indian Cities, 1650–1900*, printed PhD Thesis, Stockholm: University of Stockholm, 1980. References to this work are not separately indicated.

[46] Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London: Routledge, 2000, p. 4. For a discussion of western India as a precolonial contact zone, see Kosambi, 'Gender and Nationalism' in *Crossing Thresholds*, pp. 204–33.

(whose much truncated remnant was later known as Horniman Circle) in the Fort which was then the favoured European residential area. This 'Bombay Theatre' gradually incurred a heavy debt and had to be auctioned off in 1835. (It was bought by the Parsi merchant Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy who put it to other uses.) As a result of subsequent efforts to encourage the involvement of Mumbai's eminent Indian citizens, Shankarshet donated a plot of land out of his large estate at Grant Road. Here a new theatre was built in 1842 and inaugurated in 1846 with a performance of *The Merchant of Venice* followed by a few short farces. This Grant Road Theatre (or Bombay Theatre) initially remained a purview of the British, despite its location in the Maharashtrian–Gujarati residential area.[47] But its stuffy and generally unsatisfactory conditions prevented generous British patronage. In 1879 the British built their own Gaiety Theatre in the Fort, opposite Bori Bunder (in the vicinity of Victoria Terminus, now Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus), which still exists as Capitol Cinema. Meanwhile, the Grant Road area developed into Mumbai's theatre district, and the locality came to be known as 'Playhouse'. Even today the area retains the name in a corrupt form as 'pil-house' or 'pila-house'.

Mumbai found itself on the entertainment map of the British empire as a convenient way-station for performing troupes journeying from Britain to Calcutta or to the countries eastward.[48] These troupes offered a wide range from magic and mesmerism to skating, circus acrobatics, and marionette shows. Famous among them were Mr and Mrs Bennee who started out as comedians, but later performed scenes from Shakespeare; they also helped form the Bombay Dramatic Society of European amateurs. If the Bennees brought a whiff of the latest dramatic culture in Britain, Dave Carson, mimic and farceur – 'the only Anglo-Indian comedian in the world' as he styled himself – presented humorous takes on local foibles as well.[49] More serious fare was not altogether absent. For a brief season in early 1878, Fairclough performed Shakespearean tragedies comparable in quality to performances in England. For his *Hamlet*, the

[47] Kulkarni, *Na. Nana Shankarshet Yanche Charitra*, pp. 347–56.

[48] Kumud A. Mehta, 'Bombay's Theatre World, 1860–1880', *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bombay*, Vols 43–44, 1968–69 (New Series), pp. 251–78.

[49] The term 'Anglo-Indian' was applied to the British community resident in India.

pit of the house was 'nearly filled with native students who with text-book in hand carefully followed the rendering and sense of the play'.[50] Other companies staged a varied repertoire, from serious plays about Western political issues to burlesque.

The strongest impact of Mumbai's European drama was naturally felt among the new Western-educated intelligentsia, which eagerly imbibed these European offerings before spearheading its own theatre movement along similar lines. The real source of inspiration, however, was English drama in the college curriculum, or as translated or adapted into Marathi.

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Mumbai's other major offering was 'Parsi theatre', a unique cultural phenomenon with an eventual outreach over the entire subcontinent and also in the Parsi commercial outposts outside India, through touring companies. Spectacle and extravaganza were its markers.

The Parsis were immigrants from Persia who had fled Muslim persecution in their homeland and settled in Gujarat from about the 8th century onward. They retained their Zoroastrian religion, but adopted the language, dress, and some customs of Gujarat. Ethnically somewhat alien to India and free from the many religious inhibitions of other Indian communities, they associated closely with the British, entering into business partnerships with them, and followed them from Surat to Mumbai in large numbers. This economically and therefore socially hegemonic community formed a prosperous and Westernised middle layer between the British and other Indians and contributed greatly to Mumbai's development.

Parsi theatre used Gujarati, Hindi, and most popularly Urdu as its languages – but true to Mumbai's cosmopolitan spirit, it owed this 'vernacularisation' of the originally English productions as well as their commercial promotion to the city's Maharashtrian public leaders, such as Shankarshet and Bhau Daji.[51] Parsi theatre originally had a

[50] *Bombay Gazette*, 13 February 1878, cited in Mehta, 'Bombay's Theatre World,' p. 259.

[51] Somnath Gupt, 'Preface' in *The Parsi Theatre: Its Origins and Development* (trans. and ed. Kathryn Hansen), Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2005, p. 7. My description of the Parsi theatre is based largely on this book, as well as on Gopal Shastri, 'The Contribution made by the Parsis to Gujarati Theatre' in Nawaz B. Mody (ed.), *The Parsis in Western India, 1818–1920*, Mumbai:

distinct Parsi focus: their companies – initially known as 'clubs' – were owned by Parsis (e.g., the Victoria Theatrical Company founded by Kaikhushru Kabraji and others in 1868). Their playhouses were built and operated by Parsis (e.g., Dadi Patel's Victoria Theatre built in the 1870s and Balivala's Grand Theatre in 1907, both in the Grant Road area). Their plays were written by Parsi playwrights (e.g., by Kaikhushru Kabraji in Gujarati), and performed by Parsi actors (e.g., K.M. Balivala and Jehangir Khambatta). Later on, non-Parsi playwrights (such as Mumbai's bilingual Maharashtrian Sokar Bapuji Trilokekar who also wrote in Gujarati, and Hindi-speaking Narayan Prasad Betab from North India) as well as actors came to be employed on a regular salary, though the ownership rested with Parsis. The eventual popularity of this genre prompted theatre companies elsewhere in the country to attach the word 'Bombay' to their names to forge a link with it, no matter how spurious.

Parsi theatre emerged in October 1853, a few months after Vishnudas's first mythological show in the city in March 1853.[52] It also heralded the Gujarati-language theatre; earlier the community had only the folk theatre known as 'Bhavai'. The origin of Parsi theatre lay in the (short-lived) Parsi Natak Mandali which first staged the Sohrab–Rustom story from the Persian epic, the *Shahnameh*. There were eclectic additions of episodes from *The Arabian Nights* and the Hindu epics, as well as adaptations of English plays that had formed its initial mainstay. The plays specialised in fantasy: a perennial favourite was *Indra–Sabha* scripted by Dadi Patel (though popularly attributed to Lucknow's last Nawab, Wajid Ali Shah). It depicted the love story of one Raja Indra and a fairy – banking on the special appeal of the love between mortals and supernatural beings. The first Urdu opera *Benazir Badremunir* (performed by Victoria Theatrical Company) similarly depicted the love story of the eponymous prince and princess, triumphing over the obstacles posed by the fairy Mahrukh smitten with Prince Benazir.

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Allied Publishers, 1999 (1998), pp. 221–34; and Anuradha Kapur, 'The Representation of Gods and Heroes in the Parsi Mythological Drama of the Early Nineteenth Century' in Vasudha Dalmia and Heinrich von Stietencron (eds), *Representing Hinduism: The Construction of Religious Traditions and National Identity*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1995, pp. 401–19.

[52] Vishnudas specifically states that Parsi companies followed him; Vishnudas Bhave, 'Prastavana' in *Natya-kavita-sangraha*, Pune: Ravji Vishnu Bhave, 1885, p. 9.

Fantasy, ably sustained by spectacular and mechanically manipulated stage effects, was the main attraction of Parsi plays: gods descending from the heavens, demons rising from the underworld, the (mortal) hero being conveyed through the air, a railway train falling off a bridge into the river below – all these held the audiences in thrall. Modern lighting and innovative drop curtains added to the general technical sophistication. Anuradha Kapur argues that the Parsi mythological drama needed 'to be buttressed by miracles in order to convince the audience of the reality of the gods'.[53]

Another unique feature, equally amazing to the contemporary audiences, was the appearance of actresses in female roles. Dadi Patel recruited Muslim dancing girls from Hyderabad (after Victoria Company's performance there). The company's most popular dancer, Latifa Begum, was, however, abducted after a show, presumably by an admirer, for the two soon married. Another famous actress was the half-Irish Mary Fenton alias Meherbai who developed competence in Urdu, Hindi, and Gujarati.

Parsi plays generally focused on entertainment and fantasy rather than literary merit. The ethnic mixture that produced the famous Parsi Urdu theatre – Parsi finance, Urdu language, Muslim actors, and a largely Hindu audience – introduced a strong element of secularism. But this inhered a certain rootlessness which Girish Karnad, the modern Kannada and English playwright (and popular Hindi film actor), sees as culturally detrimental:

> The consequences of this secularism were that every character on stage, whether a Hindu deity or a Muslim legendary hero, was alienated from his true religious or cultural moorings; and myths and legends, emptied of meaning, were reshaped into tightly constructed melodramas with thundering curtain lines and a searing climax. Unlike traditional performances, which spread out in a slow, leisurely fashion, these plays demanded total attention, but only at the level of plot. Incident was all.[54]

Another highly successful mixture of the time was the Parsi stage music. While preferring Western music, the Parsis evinced a keen interest in Hindustani classical music which they promoted systematically through the 'Parsi Gayan Uttejak Mandali' in 1870, the first

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[53] Kapur, 'The Representation of Gods and Heroes', p. 418.

[54] Girish Karnad, 'Author's Introduction' in *Three Plays: Naga-Mandala, Hayavadana, Tughlaq*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006 (1994), p. 6.

such venture in Mumbai.[55] (The renowned musician Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande, who sought to codify Hindustani classical music along scientific lines and provide meticulous notation for the ragas, was admitted as a student of this society in 1883.)[56] The result of this eclecticism was a new musical style, attractive but alien.

Parsi theatre was, in the words of Aparna Dharwadker, an 'Indian equivalent of Victorian spectacular theatre' and 'an elaborate, highly profitable private enterprise based on a historically new relation between theatre, popular culture, and the sociology and demographics of the colonial city'.[57] Its greatest triumph was a vast outreach and popularity throughout the country, especially in North India. This has frequently led to an overestimation of its influence, as for example in Mani Kamerkar's claim that both Gujarati and Marathi theatre movements were heavily influenced by Parsi theatre and that 'they were in competition with Parsi productions for the heterogeneous cosmopolitan audience throughout the latter half of the 19th century'. She rightly observes, however, that 'their infrastructure, organisation, and themes were often copied'.[58]

Such exaggeration predictably elicited rejoinders, as from the noted literary and theatre critic Shanta Gokhale: 'People outside Maharashtra, familiar with [Parsi theatre's] influence on the theatres of their own languages, often ask about its influence on Marathi theatre. The short answer to the question is that there was practically none, except in the works of Shripad Krishna Kolhatkar'.[59] This was true only in a relative sense. Kolhatkar's popularity was short-lived, but his self-proclaimed disciple R.G. Gadkari displays a clear Parsi impact – through spectacles and even gory scenes – which has rarely received attention. Theatre historian and actor K. Narayan Kale traces

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[55] Sharatchandra Vishnu Gokhale, '"Indian Music among the Parsis" in Theatre' in *The Parsis in Western India*, pp. 235–49.

[56] Janaki Bakhle, *Two Men and Music: Nationalism in the Making of an Indian Classical Tradition*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005, p. 101.

[57] Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker, *Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory, and Urban Performance in India since 1947*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 39.

[58] Mani Kamerkar, 'Nascency of Nataks' in *Parsiana*, 21 August 2009, pp. 168–80. (Details of original publication not known.)

[59] Shanta Gokhale, *Playwright at the Centre: Marathi Drama from 1843 to the Present*, Calcutta: Seagull, 2000, pp. 13–14.

Gadkari's penchant for melodrama to this influence, and suggests a complex interaction: Gadkari's stylistic elegance in transforming the distinctive Parsi features resulted in a reciprocal imitation of Marathi drama by Parsi companies.[60] A marginal short-term effect of Parsi theatre was the occasional Hindustani dialogue in Marathi drama – and anachronistically even in mythological verse narratives.

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The vigour of Marathi drama is seen from the sheer volume of published (prose and musical) output: between 1861 and 1940 there appeared about 200 mythological plays; from 1859 to 1944 there were more than 50 major social plays and 235 secondary ones; from 1867 to 1947 there emerged about 300 historical plays, including the lives of saints.[61]

Equally fascinating is the abiding attraction of certain themes through a century of changing dramatic–cinematic structures. In Vishnudas's wide mythological repertoire figured the emotionally charged myth of Raja Harishchandra which resurfaced in numerous Marathi plays.[62] Decades later it inspired Phalke's pioneering silent film *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) and then Prabhat Company's first talkie *Ayodhyecha Raja* (1932). This persistence tends to be overlooked and even the role of the Marathi stage itself negated. In an interesting study of Parsi theatre Kathryn Hansen surprisingly credits its Hindi author Betab with popularising stage mythologicals and inspiring Phalke's early films.[63] It was far more likely that Betab himself was influenced by the flourishing Marathi theatre during his stay in Mumbai (1903–1908). The point here is not the direction

[60] K. Narayan Kale, 'Natya-vangmaya' in *Marathi Vangmayacha Itihas*, Khanda 5, Bhag 2, pp. 76–77, 102–06.

[61] Dandekar, *Pauranik Natake*, p. 174; Vishwanath Pandurang Dandekar, *Marathi Natya-srishti*, Khanda 2: *Samajik Natake*, Badode: V.P. Dandekar, 1945, pp. 281–366; Bhimrao Kulkarni, *Aitihasik Marathi Natake*, Pune: Joshi ani Lokhande Prakashan, 1971, pp. 309–27.

[62] The story was handled by later dramatists under various titles in 1885, 1904, 1908, and twice in 1915. Dandekar, *Pauranik Natake*, pp. 226–27, 255, 263, 285, 287.

[63] Kathryn Hansen, 'Ritual Enactments in a Hindi "Mythological": Betab's *Mahabharat* in Parsi Theatre', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 41, No. 48, 2–8 December 2006, p. 4986.

of the cultural borrowing, but the need for a proper perspective on Maharashtra's rich theatre tradition.

The unacknowledged relevance of this tradition can be hinted at through obvious transregional and transnational similarities for further exploration. One is the independent but similar origins of drama in religious enactments (like the Church-associated miracle and morality plays) and their varying persistence in later times. Another is the reconstruction of Hellenic myths and European historical episodes to convey contemporary Western social or political comment (as for example in Anouilh's *Antigone* or *Becket*). Yet another is the valence of female impersonation at various historical moments in far-flung countries like Shakespearean England and Japan where *kabuki* still remains popular. Lastly the integrality of music in mainstream dramatic performances and their specialised branches, like the Western opera, invites attention.

This renders ineluctable a multi-faceted retrieval of Maharashtra's rich theatre tradition, together with other regional traditions in India.

# PART ONE: THEATRE

**Plate 1.1:** Kirloskar Theatre in Pune, built in 1909.

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# Section I
## Phases of Evolution

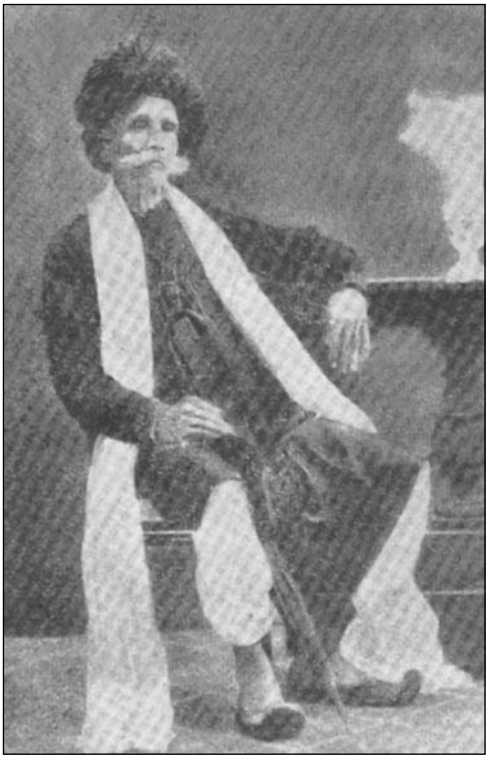

**Plate 1.2:** Vishnudas Bhave in old age, 1885.

**Plate 1.3:** Sutradhar, 'deities', Vidushak, and spectators at a mythological.

# 1

# Vishnudas Bhave's Stylised Mythologicals (1843)

The magnetism of Vishnudas's mythological plays is captured in journalist–playwright and politician N.C. Kelkar's childhood reminiscences of the 1880s when he had watched wide-eyed the conflict of good and evil unfold through a clash of *deva*s (gods) and *rakshasa*s (demons). This was at the mansion of the prince of Miraj, where the main audience sat on chairs and benches in the sunken (40×40 feet) courtyard facing the 'stage' – one side of the surrounding raised corridor equipped with a cloth curtain – while the other three sides formed the 'pit'. Nostalgia for a lost age of innocence underlines his humorously evocative Marathi description of the night-long event:

> The spatial constraint led to such a blending of actors and spectators that when Saraswati entered, [seemingly] seated on a peacock and dancing around waving handkerchiefs in both hands, the spectators who received her kicks realized that the peacock had no claws but human feet! But even the spectators lacking in proper respect for Goddess Saraswati moved back to make room for the rakshasas about to enter – because they frequently wielded real swords! The four-foot wide passage adjoining the main gate was used by both the spectators and the actors emerging from the 'green room' in make-up. This frequently led to a confused crowding, in that narrow passage, of the denizens of all three worlds – heaven, netherworld, and the mortal world! The passage was usually closed to spectators when the rakshasas were to enter, because their entry was like a lioness delivering her first litter of cubs! The curtain would be pulled aside to let them out, flanked by burning torches containing a combustible substance that produced tall flames. Surrounded by these roaring sheets of flame, each rakshas moved back and forth four times and finally made his entry with great effort, roaring like a caged tiger or lion and flashing his sword. Often a

> whole troupe of rakshasas was to enter, and their entry through this passage took as long as fifteen minutes. The poor devas were meek. They pushed aside the curtain themselves to enter; and if Vidushak was not at hand to offer them seats, they pulled up seats themselves and sat down![1]

Even in this august company, Vidushak made a distinctive visual and verbal impression. Dressed in ill-matched pieces of cloth like latter-day circus clowns, he carried on his head a large bundle of *neem* twigs whose leaves covered his face. On concluding his silly preliminaries with Sutradhar, he put down the bundle to reveal his face painted in stripes. Mainly responsible for jokes and humour, he also performed tasks such as offering seats to the newly-entered characters in keeping with their status, rendering whatever help was necessary, offering advice when asked – or even unasked – and carrying on a dialogue with Sutradhar to provide links between disjointed scenes. Dramatic convention allowed him to be present in every scene, whether it featured gods, demons, or mortals, posing as a denizen of that particular world, and smoothing things over.

But pivotal to the functioning of these spectacular personages was Sutradhar, the play's mainstay, monopolising the sung narrative to advance the action which the characters mimed. Both the male characters and females (who spoke in a thin sweet voice) paused at the appropriate juncture, saying grandly 'Lend me your ears' – and Sutradhar belted out a song in his thick and hoarse voice, clanging the cymbals, after which resumed the action and minimal dialogue.[2] The seeming artificiality of Sutradhar singing in the background throughout the show is mitigated by theatre critic Banahatti's insistence on its main advantage: other action – such as verbal skirmishes, physical combat, and later on, specially introduced dances – could occur simultaneously on the stage. This contrasted with the later musicals when one character sang and the others stood idly by, trying to conceal their boredom.[3]

At the same historical moment, in the coastal town of Ratnagiri, west of Miraj across the massive Sahyadrian range, novelist–playwright B.V. Varerkar had watched his first play – inevitably a mythological as well. In contrast to the adult Kelkar's tongue-in-cheek account of

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[1] Cited in Dandekar, *Pauranik Natake*, pp. 90–91.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 91.

[3] Banahatti, *Marathi Rangabhumicha Itihas*, pp. 165–66.

his boyhood experience, Varerkar retrieves the spirit of his early emotional response. The five-year-old had been carried by his mother on her hip up a rickety bamboo ladder to the 'women's gallery' in a makeshift theatre walled with dry, mud-plastered coconut leaves – an equivalent of the European 'fit-in' theatre made of wooden boards. The boy had sat in her lap spellbound all night, retaining a vivid memory of a sword fight. A succession of similar plays with which his father regaled him left a mixed impression: Ganesh speaking in a human voice and Saraswati dancing on a peacock strengthened his religious fervour, but the roaring rakshasas engulfed in flames filled him with terror which he gradually overcame because of Vidushak's free and easy interaction with them.[4]

Total identification with stage characters came easily to children, but their reactions were unpredictable. In the early 1900s, the actor Nanasaheb Chapekar had sobbed his heart out as a child during the tragic mythological play *Harishchandra* at Pune, as had little Varerkar.[5] But about the same time, the same play elicited a very different response from their contemporary P.K. Atre (later humorist and playwright) at the nearby small town of Saswad. Being tickled by Vidushak's witty sally with Saraswati in the prologue, he laughed uncontrollably through the tragedy which was 'dripping with the sentiment of compassion' as if it were a farce, much to the annoyance of his neighbours, until he fell into an exhausted sleep.[6]

This ubiquity and popularity of shared experiences explain Vishnudas's title: 'Bharat Muni of Marathi drama'. His revolutionary innovation presented 'the first non-traditional, non-folk, non-ritualistic dramatic performance in Marathi' in 1843, to quote theatre critic Shanta Gokhale.[7] However, it remained strongly religious in nature and imbricated at many points with the prevalent traditional, folk, and ritualistic performances.

Vishnudas's ground-breaking achievement was 'the generation of a new performative public sphere' retaining continuity with the

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[4] Bhargavram Vitthal Varerkar, *Maza Nataki Sansar*, Krishna Kurwar (ed.), Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1995, pp. 7–8.

[5] Shankar Nilkantha Chapekar, *Smriti-dhan*, Mumbai: Mauj Prakashan Griha, 1966, p. 4; Varerkar, *Maza Nataki Sansar*, p. 19.

[6] Pralhad Keshav Atre, *Mi Kasa Zalo?* Mumbai: G.P. Parachure Prakashan Mandir, 1953, p. 59.

[7] Gokhale, *Playwright at the Centre*, p.1.

existing religious–cultural flows.[8] He and his successors are further credited with having shaped this public sphere as secular but also ennobling, didactic but also entertaining, and with disseminating knowledge about the sacred texts known as *puranas*.[9] His new idiom conflated the kirtan-performer's akhyan (akin to a libretto) with selected Sanskrit dramatic conventions, attiring the core requirements of drama in the popular and respectable garb of sacred stories. But when his collection of 'dramatic poems' was published – as late as 1885 – he was only too willing to emphasise his pioneering role (in his partly autobiographical preface) and locate himself within the classical Sanskrit dramatic tradition.[10] He valorises the play (natak) as the best type of entertainment, because it combines recreation with moral instruction, excellent speeches, and interesting events replete with rasas and accompanied by song and dance. (The original term for his performances was not 'natak' but the generic 'Ramavatar' – broadly the legends of Ram.) Rather nationalistically he insists that the dramatic art originated in ancient India and spread to other countries, although the classical Sanskrit dramas and dramaturgical texts were lost through the vagaries of history. In conclusion he underscores his own reclaiming of the lost classical tradition.

## Vishnudas's Revolution in Entertainment

Vishnudas's life spanned eventful political and cultural transitions. He was born immediately after the end of the Peshwai (probably in 1819) – when popular entertainment was either crudely religious or erotic – and died at the age of about 82 in 1901 during high imperialism when the hugely popular musical plays had practically wiped out his brand of stylised mythologicals.

His family tree reads like a chart of Maratha history.[11] His Brahmin forefathers had served Maratha chiefs including the Peshwa. His

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[8] Christopher Pinney, 'Introduction: Public, Popular, and Other Cultures' in Rachel Dwyer and Christopher Pinney (eds), *Pleasure and the Nation: The History, Politics and Consumption of Public Culture in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 2. This was comparable to today's 'new performative public sphere' in India linked to cinema and television.

[9] Dandekar, *Pauranik Natake*, pp. 76, 85.

[10] Bhave, 'Prastavana' in *Natya-kavita-sangraha*, pp. 1–10.

[11] For Vishundas's ancestry, see Vasudev Ganesh Bhave, *Aadya Maharashtra Natakakar Vishnudas: Vishnu Amrit Bhave Yanche Charitra*, Sangli: V.G. Bhave, 1943. For details of his professional life, see Bhave, 'Prastavana'.

grandfather later joined the army of the Peshwa's Brahmin sardar, Patwardhan, who reverted to his family estate of Sangli (part of the original estate of Miraj). His father trained Patwardhan's infantry and cavalry along modern British lines.

Vishnu Amrit (alias Vishnudas) Bhave was an unruly child; having incurred his father's wrath at a young age, he was raised by his maternal grandparents in north Karnataka. He studied Sanskrit, mastered the requisite Brahmin prayers and rituals, and learned Kannada. At 12 he returned to Sangli and, after a brief stint in school, devoted himself to classical Hindustani music under the court musician. This was the post-Peshwa period of peace, prosperity, and enjoyment, with a great deal of music, dancing and tamashas, all of which young Vishnudas eagerly consumed. He attracted Patwardhan's patronage through skills ranging from sculpting clay figurines to composing and narrating mythological stories as daily entertainment.

A fresh impulse to his creativity was the yakshagan performances of a visiting troupe from Karnataka at the Sangli court in 1842. Patwardhan instructed him to create a similar but improved Marathi version, promising all help. Vishnudas, in his early 20s at the time (although he and his biographer grandson claim he was below 20) started his preparations.

The task of composing the play was facilitated by the vast existing pool of mythology, the provenance of all folk entertainment. Vishnudas composed his own akhyan and set it to raga tunes. His unacknowledged debt to existing compositions has been traced by literary critics.[12] The issue is not his borrowing, but his innovation and the continuity of the cultural tradition.

A troupe of actors was assembled, using Patwardhan's offer of a few young men; Vishnudas advertised for more by promising lucrative state jobs and awards. He dispatched assistants to discover young, talented boys in Konkan, the traditional home of dashavatar performances. Such boys were needed for female roles, respectable women being banned as entertainers. Sometimes grown men (who were required to keep a moustache) impersonated women by pasting a piece of paper over the moustache, or half covering the face; after

[12] See V.V. Patwardhan, 'Natya-vangmaya' in *Marathi Vangmayacha Itihas*, Khanda 4, pp. 346–48. Maya Sardesai traces the influence of the akhyan of *Sita-svayamvar* by Raja Pratapsinh of Tanjore; Sardesai, *Bharatiya Rangabhumichi Parampara*, p. 13.

all, realism was not an overriding concern. This practice gradually declined after 1875.[13] (P.K. Atre recounts having seen in his boyhood a rural amateur group staging Kirloskar's *Saubhadra*: the actor playing Subhadra indignantly refused to shave off his moustache, because his father was still alive. The audience, attuned to this reasoning, did not object and applauded him enthusiastically.)[14]

All these actors were housed and fed at state expense. Vishnudas's format involved role specialisation on the basis of physique, a stock character–actor being known as a 'party': a strong, hefty actor was identified as a rakshas-party and/or *rishi*-party, a regular-sized man as a dev-party, and a young lad as a *stri*-party, to impersonate demons/sages, gods, and women. Additionally two actors specialised as Sutradhar and Vidushak. The verse narrative sung by Sutradhar advanced the story and the actors spoke a minimal dialogue (which has not merited inclusion in Vishnudas's published poems). Vishnudas trained the actors to mime actions and portray the relevant rasas in a stylised manner, for example, a 'woman' was to display her grief by throwing herself to the ground.

Using his impressive skills, Vishnudas himself made the requisite props and accessories: the crowns and costume jewellery for the stage royalty, wigs for the 'women', false beards for the sages, extra arms for the gods, additional heads for Ravan, a peacock's head and plumage for Saraswati to tie around her waist, and a manoeuvrable trunk for Ganesh.

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Vishnudas's maiden performance, *Sita-svayamvar*, was held in 1843 for Patwardhan and a select audience, and became an instant and resounding success. The stamp of royal and popular approval founded the new tradition of stylised mythologicals.

The format revealed both the genre's cultural roots and Vishnudas's innovation. The 'stage' for the initial shows was an open space – Patwardhan's audience hall or the hall of his Ganesh temple – with a plain maroon cloth at the back which was pushed aside to allow the entry and exit of characters. To one side in front of the cloth curtain stood Sutradhar and his accompanists with their musical instruments.

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[13] Banahatti, *Marathi Rangabhumicha Itihas*, p. 314.

[14] Atre, *Mi Kasa Zalo?* pp. 60–61.

Sutradhar initiated the proceedings with a prayer. Then entered Vidushak, dressed as a forest-dweller, with twigs attached to his arms and head, and covering his face. After his laughter-provoking antics, the two engaged in a crudely humorous dialogue, and Sutradhar informed him about the play to be performed. Vidushak stayed on-stage throughout the performance, as a stage-manager and prompter.

In response to Sutradhar's invocation, Ganesh entered with dancing steps. Painted and clothed in red, he gasped out his blessings for the success of the performance through his ill-ventilated artificial trunk. Saraswati was next invoked and appeared, seemingly seated upon a dancing peacock. Her blessing focused on the actors speaking their dialogues fluently and confidently – this being an evident source of anxiety. Then entered a group of boys – labelled celestial child singers, who appropriately had wings attached to their arms – and performed a song and dance. It seems that Vishnudas had even tried – unsuccessfully – to devise a 'flying entry' for them through an arrangement of ropes; whether this can be traced in any way to Parsi theatre is not clear. All these departed at the end of the dance. Also the meagre imitation of dancing as in yakshagan ended here, given Maharashtra's absence of a dancing tradition or talent.

The story then unfolded through Sutradhar's musical narrative. The music was eclectically composed of ragas as well as the standard Sanskrit verse metres, Marathi verse metres (such as *arya*, *ovi*, and *katav*) and even tunes of lavanis, as indicated in Vishnudas's published poems. The narrative provided cues to the actors to speak their short lines. When asked a question, the actor would return the rather pompous, Sanskritised reply, '*Sangato, shravan kar*' (I shall tell you, lend me your ears), and the reply would be sung out by Sutradhar while the actor acted it out through miming and emoting.

The play was broadly divided into scenes or *kacheri*s; all the characters would exit at the end of a scene and new ones enter to mark the beginning of the next scene. Of the three standard scenes, two separately involved devas and rakshasas, each faction plotting against the other, with a special scene for women – how these were incorporated into the large variety of themes is left to the imagination. No drop curtains or painted scenes existed, and only a few seats were placed on the 'stage'. Some theatre historians suggest that the stage was partitioned with large pieces of cloth to show all three scenes

simultaneously, though this seems doubtful in view of the spatial constraint and unsophisticated stage technology.

The play ended with another prayer, in the nature of the Sanskrit Bharat-vakya or the formal concluding prayer, followed by the ritual *aarati* (ceremonial waving of a lamp in a metal platter before a deity) as in a temple. The spectators were expected to put money in the platter, as they would after a kirtan. The religious and ritual anchorage of the performance was thus underscored.

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Even within the fantasy-filled paradigm of mythologicals, Vishnudas attempted to infuse 'realism' through imaginative make-up and costumes. By convention, the 'rakshas-party' had black and white stripes on his face, bright red lips and eyes, large false teeth protruding over his lower lip, and long matted hair. But Vishnudas added features like large and strangely shaped noses, ears, chins, and teeth with light wood and papier mache to create variation and individuality. Only tall and hefty men, skilled in swordplay were recruited as rakshas-parties. That the much-dreaded demons were also the most impressive is shown by the later generic – albeit derogatory – label for mythologicals as 'rakshas-dominated' plays, never 'dev-dominated'. The characters of Hiranya-kashyapu, and especially Narasinha (Man-lion, the fourth incarnation of Vishnu) who killed him, were so terrifying that children and pregnant women were not allowed to see this particular performance.

The dev-party actors had a mild demeanour and suitably noble make-up (with foreheads painted white), and their short dialogues were sprinkled with Sanskrit, 'the language of the gods'. Both devas and rakshasas had additional artificial arms attached to their shoulders. The character of Hanuman had a tail so long and heavy that a couple of men had to accompany him on stage carrying it.[15] Young, delicate-looking, and relatively soft-spoken lads were usually chosen as stri-parties. They were dressed beautifully and trained to behave with due decorum. The story goes that a lad named Raghu Phadke once attended a women's *haladi-kunku* function in broad daylight

[15] Appaji Vishnu Kulkarni, *Marathi Rangabhumi*, Pune: A.V. Kulkarni, 1903, pp. 32–33.

dressed as a woman, without being detected.[16] The same anecdote was later repeated in connection with every famous stri-party of the musical theatre – from Shankarrao Mujumdar and Bhaurao Kolhatkar to Bal Gandharva – to validate his flawless female impersonation.

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Vishnudas's published 'poem' or verse narrative for *Sita-svayamvar* contains a series of songs in various ragas to express emotions, and in verse metres to advance action.[17] Originally entitled 'the reviving of Ahilya and Sita's svayamvar', the story starts with the invitation received by Ram to attend the svayamvar. His journey to Mithila, accompanied by Lakshman, wends through a forest where he happens to touch a large stone with his foot, thus bringing Ahilya back to life. The background to this episode is that Ahilya, wife of the sage Gautam, is beautiful enough to tempt Indra, the frequently lecherous king of gods, who visits her in the guise of her husband when the real sage is away. Upon his return Gautam is furious to discover the deception and inflicts a curse upon his duped wife to turn her to stone until revived by Ram. The story is regarded by feminists as a perfect example of the female victim being further victimised by patriarchal norms.

Ram then reaches Mithila where kings and princes from many lands have assembled to win Sita. Her father, King Janak, has set a condition for winning her hand – the suitor has to lift a heavy bow and put an arrow to it. The formidable task discourages all. Janak then enquires of Sita whether she has a preference for any suitor and she indicates Ram. Just then an angry Ravan arrives, not having been invited to the event. He starts lifting the bow, but is weighed down and almost crushed by it as he falls to the ground. His pleas for help fall on deaf ears until Ram lifts the bow off his chest with ease and rescues him. (Why Ram did not lift the bow in the first place remains unanswered in the narrative.) Ravan immediately flees to Lanka. Sita garlands Ram.

A letter is duly dispatched to King Dasharath who arrives with his two younger sons Bharat and Shatrughna. Janak offers his brother's three daughters to Ram's three younger brothers; all four weddings

[16] Bhave, *Aadya Maharashtra Natakakar*, pp. 60–61.
[17] Bhave, *Natya-kavita-sangraha*, pp. 33–36.

are simultaneously celebrated. Gods, sages, and celestial beings shower the couples with flowers from the heavens. The wedding party departs for Ayodhya.

The 'poem' only tells the bare story; how it was embellished with histrionic flourishes is left to our imagination today. What is certain is that this brief plot formed the basis of a performance several hours long.

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The play's enormous success silenced Vishnudas's critics and adversaries, but only temporarily. They soon retaliated by ostracising him and his troupe, claiming that all actors had been stigmatised by (some) scriptures and disallowed social interaction with the upper castes, especially Brahmins. Patwardhan himself intervened by having a learned Brahmin at his court publicly announce that (some other) scriptures did not so condemn actors.

Going from strength to strength, Vishnudas presented 10 'Ramavatar' plays at the Sangli court within a year. Pleased and impressed, Patwardhan promised him a large hereditary estate and similar estates to some members of his troupe. But the actual deeds were deliberately delayed by envious officers. After Patwardhan's sudden death in 1851 his son (still a minor) could not undertake such an important transaction. The chief administrator advised Vishnudas to travel with his troupe to earn money and granted them four years' leave without pay.

Seeking the traditional princely and aristocratic patronage, Vishnudas first toured the small princely states and Jagirs of Miraj, Jamkhandi, Mudhol, Ichalkaranji, Kurundwad, and Kolhapur in 1852. Arguably his most effective plays were those of Narasinha, the Man-lion, which nearly caused the death of a spectator through sheer terror, and the emotionally loaded story of Raja Harishchandra, vastly popular possibly for its cathartic effect. Harishchandra's famed truthfulness and generosity are tested by Sage Vishwamitra (as part of his wager with Sage Vasishtha, Harishchandra's guru) who appears at the king's court and extracts from him the gift of his kingdom, compelling the king to leave his palace together with queen Taramati and the little prince. They go through untold hardships, are sold separately as slaves, and even face death. The sage is satisfied and restores the king's family and kingdom. The company made a tidy profit from this tour, in terms of cash and rich costumes.

The second tour in 1853 was both ambitious and path-breaking in that it sought public patronage in the towns and cities of Karad, Satara, Phaltan, Baramati, Ahmadnagar, and Pune (where the prejudice against seeing the face of an actor was still strong). These performances were held in public places such as street corners, just like tamashas. He formed friendships with and received help from eminent persons, such as Krishnashastri Chiplunkar.[18] Later he reached Mumbai, giving performances along the way. In Mumbai he presented four or five performances a month, but without making a profit. He incurred a debt, but received acclaim. Here he formed friendships with renowned persons like Dr Bhau Daji, Nana Shankarshet, and Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy.[19]

In Mumbai Vishnudas saw an English play at Grant Road Theatre and was impressed by its 'orderliness, seating arrangement, curtains, scenes, etc.'. But the charges were prohibitive. Lowering his sights temporarily, he gave a performance in the enclosed compound of a private bungalow in Girgaum and earned a good profit.

Finally his new friends and well-wishers helped him achieve his ambition. He performed a new play at the theatre, 'attended by most of the eminent people of Mumbai – merchants and moneylenders, government servants, Europeans, Parsis and others'. The crowning glory was the visit – arranged by Bhau Daji – of the Governor's Secretary to the green room. The Secretary was delighted enough with the performance to suggest the troupe's visit to England which would earn them both money and fame. Vishnudas declined because of religious prohibition against crossing the sea and contented himself with the acclaim received in 'all the English and Marathi newspapers'.[20]

The distance between a bungalow in Girgaum, the Maharashtrian residential enclave near the Chowpatty beach, to the proscenium stage of Grant Road Theatre was only a longish walk. But for Vishnudas, it was a giant professional leap – and a lucrative one, for the first performance sold tickets worth Rs 1,800. It is a measure of the local support he was able to garner from Mumbai's Maharashtrian and cosmopolitan elite that *The Bombay Times* (later *The Times of India*)

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[18] Bhave, 'Prastavana', p. 7. (Krishnashastri Chiplunkar, Vishnushastri's father, was secretary of the Dakshina Prize Committee for literature and also translated *The Arabian Nights* into Marathi.)

[19] *Ibid.*

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 8.

gave him wide coverage, publishing a short report filed by a 'Native Correspondent' and several long editorial notes in the nature of advance publicity as well as subsequent reviews, urging the local European population to patronise the play. An editorial note (8 March 1853) described Vishnudas's performances as 'new to the European spectator' and based on plays of 'genuine native origin from the early classic dramas of Hindoostan'.[21] It hastened to assure the readers that the plays are 'void of everything approaching to [*sic*] licentiousness or indecorum and are images of the old moralities in which the Christian Church in olden times used to rejoice'.[22] English outlines of the play were inserted in the following day's edition. The paper (11 March 1853) bemoaned the thin attendance by Indians – several European gentlemen but no ladies were present – and expressed surprise that 'the Hindoo gentry do not extend their patronage more freely to the national drama'. Despite the lack of attention paid to the 'scenery and other similar accessories', the paper declared the performance 'really admirable' – even across the language barrier, and reiterated that it was 'highly entertaining' and contained nothing objectionable.[23] The repeated assurances of the acceptability of the plays obviously stemmed from the colonial racial/cultural prejudice.

Vishnudas's repertoire in Mumbai included stories from the *Ramayan*, *Mahabharat*, and parts of dashavatar, which seem to have attracted large enough audiences to encourage his 'Hindoo Dramatic Corps' to stage an additional and sixth performance at Grant Road Theatre 'in deference to the opinions of the Native Press and many highly respectable persons', as *The Bombay Times* reported (8 April 1853).[24] Advertisements for Vishnudas's plays were a routine commercial transaction. But the paper promoting the plays through editorial notes and eye-witness accounts testifies to the canvassing done by influential citizens like Bhau Daji who was associated with the management of Grant Road Theatre and signed bills on its behalf.[25]

During his seven documented tours, Vishnudas visited Mumbai four times. He would leave Sangli after Diwali and return after

[21] Reproduced in Banahatti, *Marathi Rangabhumicha Itihas*, p. 392.
[22] *Ibid.*
[23] *Ibid.*, pp. 396–98.
[24] *Ibid.*, p. 406.
[25] *Ibid.*, p. 383.

six months. After probably a couple of months' rest, he started preparations for the next tour – recruiting and training new actors if necessary, repairing or replenishing the wardrobe, composing new verse narratives and arranging plays around them. In 1861 he terminated his venture after 18 years and retired at about 42.

But his legacy was perpetuated: some actors from his disbanded troupe set up their own troupes. The pride of a trend-setter pervades Vishnudas's words: 'There were plays being performed everywhere'. 'Learned people' as well as high school and college students wrote plays. 'This spread among the Parsis and they set up companies. Finally, in 1880, a musical company was established [by Kirloskar] in the style that the English call "opera". Thus this national pastime which had been defunct was rejuvenated'.[26]

After his early retirement, Vishnudas took up several state assignments attracted by his technical knowledge – including supervision of construction projects at Sangli, and construction of a lake at Kolhapur. He worked for a few years in a brick and tile factory at Hyderabad, visited Gwalior, Jaipur, and the pilgrimage sites in North India. He also helped to set up theatre performances, and arranged puppet shows in Sangli in 1875. Vishnudas died in 1901 at the age of about 82 during the virulent bubonic plague epidemic in western India.

Even within the expanding British cultural ambit, Vishnudas operated in an entirely indigenous cultural paradigm. His greatest contribution was to lay the rudimentary foundations for modern theatre by elaborating upon the existing folk forms, and to serve as an important mediator without producing anything entirely original. He revolutionised the cultural scene by providing a new, respectable form of family entertainment across socio-economic divides, and offering a conflation of religious experience and ennobling philosophy embedded within a musical unfolding of a familiar mythological story.

Vishnudas combined many roles: a playwright with a prolific output of over 50 published verse narratives for which he also devised the scenes and wrote rudimentary dialogues (unfortunately not published); a director and 'rehearsal master' who taught the actors to

[26] Bhave, 'Prastavana', pp. 8–9.

speak their lines and mime actions; an imaginative creator of costumes and accessories. But he never stepped on to the stage himself.

He also introduced the revolutionary and definitive shift, albeit under financial compulsions, from wealthy private patronage to a wider and substantial public patronage through ticketed performances, especially in Mumbai. This soon became the norm elsewhere. With this mass base, theatre was poised within a decade to serve as a conduit for social, and especially political, awakening – through messages couched in mythological and historical themes.

Despite exposure to British theatre, Vishnudas retained his insularity as regards the scope and format of his performances, probably because of his location within the existing tradition which allowed only a representation of religion. Thus he became the first Brahmin manager of a Brahmin drama company set up entirely to promote this new type of entertainment. Before his day, non-ritualistic entertainment had been mainly the secular tamasha, which was far from respectable and at times even downright vulgar and crudely erotic, and thus regarded as a lower-caste/class form of entertainment.

Years after his productive career, Vishnudas emerged from his circumscribed world of the Indian classical tradition, having gradually broadened his worldview and familiarised himself with the contemporary ideological trends. That he published his narrative poems in 1885, the same year that the Indian National Congress was founded, gives us an idea of the eventful decades his life spanned. In his preface Vishnudas nationalistically rebuts the charge that the Indian imagination was limited and produced only 50 (extant) Sanskrit plays (while Shakespeare alone wrote 36 plays). He deploys the popular argument of the 'Spiritual East': ancient India's intelligentsia was too preoccupied with matters philosophical and otherworldly to delve into worldly concerns like drama. Also,

> our country had already attained the pinnacle of achievement in religion, learning, education, arts, wealth, and suchlike, and caused other nations to hanker enviously after acquiring them. For about 3,000 years, Yavanas [presumably Muslims], Greeks, and other people decimated our country with their assaults, and caused many upheavals . . . It may be assumed that this destruction unfortunately affected even renowned books.[27]

[27] Bhave, 'Prastavana', pp. 3–4.

He ends his account – innocent of modesty – by expressing satisfaction at having restored Indian drama to its rightful, high status.

## 'Plays Everywhere': Vishnudas's Followers

**Plate 1.4:** 'Gods' and 'women' in a mythological play.

The success, fame, and wealth Vishnudas amassed during his 18 active years enticed to the arena of stylised mythologicals a plethora of new companies. As he said himself, 'there were plays everywhere'. His Sanglikar Hindu Natak Mandali – the word 'Hindu' was probably added in multi-religious Mumbai – ultimately spawned four Sanglikar companies.[28] A number of competitors emerged, taking their names from their place of origin – Ichalkaranji, Kolhapur, Mumbai (or its localities), Pune, and others. Over 100 such companies mushroomed out of the original dozen in the early 1860s.[29] Unfortunately the lucrative 'business' also lured many illiterate people and the level of their performances sank low enough for all actors to be regarded as immoral persons addicted to vices.[30] Most of them used Vishnudas's popular, orally perpetuated 'poems', supplemented by specially commissioned texts. Vishnudas's plays, with their excellent stories

[28] The word 'Mandali' in this context means 'Company'; the two words are henceforth used interchangeably.

[29] Kulkarni, *Marathi Rangabhumi*, p. 26.

[30] *Ibid.*, pp. 34–36.

and chaste language, were credited with having weaned people away from vulgar tamashas.[31]

Each company had a repertoire of about a dozen such plays. Except for Mumbai and Pune (which had a couple of theatres for ticketed performances) the shows were usually held at the mansion of an eminent local resident. Just before the night-long performance, the proprietor would approach the host with his list of plays. When the host's choice was indicated, the performance started after only a short interval, with hardly any time for special preparation. If an actor forgot his lines or missed his cue, the others made up for it with great presence of mind to bring the action back on track. Vidushak had a special responsibility in this regard. The story goes that once a young female impersonator prostrated himself on the ground in grief and happened to fall asleep, holding up the play. With great agility, Vidushak managed to leap lightly on his big toe without hurting him; the actor woke up and continued the dialogue.[32]

Ichalkaranjikar Natak Mandali, one of the earliest followers – and competitors – of Vishnudas, was set up in 1850 and functioned until 1892.[33] Its verse narratives included also dialogue and were specially composed by the immensely popular P.R. alias Babajishastri Datar who traversed over Sanskrit, Marathi, Hindustani, and a smattering of Kannada – with an anachronistic use of English words like 'books' to introduce humour.[34] An old account revealingly claims that 'although this company performed plays, the conduct of its members at other times adhered to the Brahmin way of life'.[35] The Sanskrit-educated Brahmin actors, especially Antajipant Tamhankar, were assets in many ways. Once an actor was delayed for a *Ramayan*-based play; Tamhankar quickly donned the garb of Sage Vasishtha and embarked upon a sermon in response to a question from Dasharath, holding the audience spell-bound for over an hour, until the errant actor arrived.[36] Another time, Tamhankar, a strong and big-built

[31] Dandekar, *Pauranik Natake*, p. 84.

[32] Kulkarni, *Marathi Rangabhumi*, p. 28, fn.

[33] Banahatti, *Marathi Rangabhumicha Itihas*, pp. 133–71.

[34] *Ibid.*, pp. 141–71.

[35] Cited in Banahatti, *Marathi Rangabhumicha Itihas*, p. 134. In popularity as a narrative-composer Vishnudas was followed by Babajishastri Datar and Nana Soni of Pune. B.P. Kirloskar, founder of the musical play, initially also wrote songs and akhyans for mythological theatre companies.

[36] Banahatti, *Marathi Rangabhumicha Itihas*, p. 139.

rishi-party and rakshas-party, ousted a gang of trouble-makers who gatecrashed a performance.[37] The specialisation of companies in a specific type of characters gave rise to the saying that devas should be impersonated by Kolhapurkars, women by Sanglikars, and rakshasas by Punekars.[38]

Reinvention through adaptation to changing public tastes was achieved by Ichalkaranjikar Company by diversifying from stylised mythologicals, to 'farces' and in 1862 to prose plays, under the efficient and democratic manager Raghunath alias Raghoba Apte. The company then essayed Sanskrit plays and some Shakespeare in translation, but did not survive long after Raghoba's departure in 1884.[39]

Chitta-chakshu-chamatkarik Kolhapurkar Natak Mandali (broadly, provider of marvels for the mind and the eye, 1865) started with mythologicals and added prose plays to its repertoire. It toured extensively within Maharashtra and beyond, receiving generous patronage from the princely families of Baroda, Indore, and Gwalior. The company members, being pious Brahmins, went from Gwalior to Banaras and staged mythological plays for the pandits there, to great acclaim. On a tour of the South, they visited Hyderabad, Bangalore, and Tanjore. During a performance of *Shri-Ram-rajyabhishek* for the royal family of Tanjore, the devout queen mother had gold flowers offered at Ram's feet. A second extensive tour took the company literally across the length and breadth of the Indian subcontinent – in the south to Madras and Pudukottai, in the north from Nagpur to Gwalior, Banaras, and Bithoor.[40]

Pune produced a couple of drama companies. The strangely named Vibudha-jana Chitta-chatak Punekar Natak Mandali employed at least three women (of the courtesan community) whose acting as well as private conduct was said to be 'restrained' and respectable.[41] The first company to emulate Vishnudas in Mumbai was Mumbaikar Hindu Natak Mandali or 'Bombay Hindu Dramatic Corps' in 1855. Almost immediately it was followed by Amarchand-wadikar Natak Mandali (1855), which introduced two innovations – one was appropriate

[37] *Ibid.*, p. 138.
[38] Kulkarni, *Marathi Rangabhumi*, p. 31.
[39] Banahatti, *Marathi Rangabhumicha Itihas*, p. 139.
[40] *Ibid.*, pp. 217–21.
[41] *Ibid.*, p. 227.

'scenery' (painted curtains) for mythological plays.[42] The other was adding a farce to such plays. Neither of these two Mumbai-based companies toured outside the city; both priced their tickets at half the rates charged by Vishnudas, testifying to the latter's hegemonic status. Altekar Hindu Natak Mandali from the town of Alte restricted itself to mythologicals, boasting a repertoire of 60 akhyans, and also specialised in farces.[43]

Vishnudas's plays, though innovative, were at one level an extension of the religious and ritualistic sermons and performances which traditionally switched effortlessly between prose and song. He consciously introduced classical music, the fantastic feats of demons, miracles, battle scenes (which appealed greatly to his princely and aristocratic patrons), and piteous scenes of grieving women. Despite Vidushak's frequently puerile and shallow stock humour, a generally respectable level was maintained. The same could not be said of his followers and even the famous among these could not equal Vishnudas's status. With a proliferation of theatre companies and intense competition, audience pressure demanded something novel and more attractive; hence the farces which grew increasingly more tasteless.

## Popularity and Outreach of Mythologicals

The impact of mythologicals within and beyond Maharashtra was incredible. Mumbai's sizable multi-lingual communities, especially the large and wealthy Gujarati merchants, were specially wooed. Vishnudas's first tour of Mumbai claimed the patronage of rich Vaishnavite Gujaratis whose religious guru awarded him Rs 3,000 as well as rich costumes after a special performance of *Rasa-krida*, Krishna's marvel of assuming many identical forms to simultaneously dance with many *gopi*s (or milkmaids). The post-performance aarati yielded a collection of up to Rs 400. One show of Ram's defeat of Ravan earned a collection of Rs 1,000.[44] Mumbai's Hindi-speaking community was similarly courted. Early on, Vishnudas was encouraged by Bhau Daji to write and perform a Hindi akhyan on

[42] Kolhapurkar Mandali is also credited with having added painted curtains in about 1875 after seeing Parsi theatre at Hyderabad; Kulkarni, *Marathi Rangabhumi*, p. 33, fn.

[43] Banahatti, *Marathi Rangabhumicha Itihas*, pp. 230, 235, 241.

[44] *Ibid*., pp. 105–06.

Gopichand. This sole Hindi composition (included in his published poems) has been lauded by theatre historian Somnath Gupt as the first Hindi play written in India.[45]

An even more remarkable marker of the mythologicals' appeal to Mumbai's multi-religious communities was their functioning as a microcosm of national integration. It embraced non-Hindus like the Jewish Bene Israelis ('children of Israel') of Konkan, who had – during a centuries-long settlement – adopted Marathi language and literature as their own, and steeped themselves in both Jewish and local cultures. Arguably the most fascinated and fascinating of Vishnudas's followers among these was Mumbai's versatile and multi-lingual poet, dramatist, and journalist David Haeem – whose family name 'Divekar' (from the village of Dive) was not used, in keeping with the prevalent Maharashtrian custom. His distinguished lineage included a grandfather, adopted by an army commander, who had been captured by Tipu Sultan and released in 1796. A prolific Marathi and Urdu writer, Divekar traversed with ease genres and topics from a life of Moses in verse (1884) to kirtans and novels. His Marathi plays include the farce *Chhelbatau va Mohana Rani* (1872) and an adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice* (in which he acted).[46]

Divekar's contribution to Hindu mythologicals is *Rasa-krida* (Krishna's semi-erotic marvels, 1874) – a tribute to his 'guru', Vishnudas.[47] This is an attempt to rectify its absence in Vishnudas's repertoire of available (but thus far unpublished) plays.

> I have attempted to omit the undesirable part and put together a collection of apt speeches and excellent songs. I had intended to include only my own

[45] Gupt, *The Parsi Theatre*, p. 203.

[46] The personal information about Divekar comes from Rivka Israel (email dated 2 June 2008), for which I am grateful to her. Many of Divekar's prolific Marathi works have a Jewish thrust: a history of the Bene Israelis in India, works on Israel, part translations of the Bible, kirtans on Moses, etc. He also made the Marathi translation *Gul va Sanobar* (part 2) from the Urdu. His heavily didactic and Sanskritised Marathi novel, *Priyakant va Sushila* (Mumbai: Oriental Press, 1872), has an appended list of advance subscribers which includes eminent residents of diverse religions, belonging to Mumbai, Belgaum, and coastal towns like Karwar and Malwan. His Urdu works include an adaptation of *Laila Majnu* (in which he acted).

[47] David Haeem [Divekar], *Krishna-khandatil Natakarupi Rasa-krida*, Mumbai: National Chhapkhana, 1874. He published the same play under the title *Rasa-krida athava Rangabhumi.*

> songs, but found the songs prevalent among veteran actors to be sweeter . . . and have included them in a revised form, adding new ones.[48]

Its comparison with Vishnudas's akhyan published later (in 1885) under the same rubric does indeed reveal similarities, alongside divergences inevitable in its oral transmission. Significantly and touchingly, Divekar retained or inserted Vishnudas's name in some songs to give him due credit.

The play is introduced by 'Natak Nayak' (leader of the play), with his friend substituting for Vidushak. Functioning as Sutradhar, Nayak sings all the songs, starting with an invocation to Ganesh and Saraswati; but the innovation is the dialogues spoken by the characters. Scene 1 shows Shrikrishna (identified in the *dramatis personae* as Parameshwar or God) promising to show new marvels to his favourite, lisping, friend Pendya. In Scene 2, several married women of Gokul, including Radha (and some with typically Maharashtrian names, such as Chimi, Thaki, Saguni, and Yamuni), are enticed by Krishna's flute and steal away at night to meet him. Pendya appears in the guise of a policeman and threatens to arrest them (in Hindustani, anachronistically enough). They coax him into letting them go. In the next scene, these women sing songs to woo Krishna (now identified as 'the son of Nanda'). He declares his preference for Radha and disappears with her, leaving them deflated. On reappearing, he frolics with each of them separately, making her feel elated as the chosen one. (An illustration in the book shows one Krishna with each woman – dressed in the typically Maharashtrian style – all pairs dancing in a circle.) Krishna has also recreated the women's duplicates in their homes to cover up their absence.

Incidentally, there were other Bene Israelis involved later with the Marathi theatre. In the 1920s Yosef David Penkar (from Pen) wrote some seven Marathi musical plays, as well as Urdu, Hindi, and Gujarati ones – all based on the Jewish lore. He also published verse narratives for kirtans on David and Esther. Most importantly, he wrote the script for *Alam Ara* (1931), the first Indian 'talkie'.[49]

[48] Divekar, 'Prastavana' in *Rasa-krida.*

[49] Jaya Dadkar, et al. (eds), *Sankshipta Marathi Vangmaya Kosh: Arambhapasun 1920 paryantacha Kalkhanda*, Mumbai: G.R. Bhatkal Foundation, 2003 (1998), p. 350.

The greater cultural Maharashtra provided guaranteed centres of patronage – Baroda, Indore, and Gwalior, as well as smaller states like Jhansi. A thrilling eye-witness account of a theatre company's visit to Jhansi in early 1857, a few weeks before the fateful battle, comes from Vishnubhat Godse, a poor Brahmin priest from Konkan. (Godse was driven by poverty and debt to tour the northern Maratha states in expectation of the customary charity to Brahmins, along with his paternal uncle, also a priest.) He records that a 50-strong troupe from Konkan attracted such crowds at Gwalior that finally two-*anna* tickets had to be charged as a deterrent. In response to the courtiers' appeal for permission to invite the troupe, the Rani of Jhansi only offered to arrange a performance if the troupe arrived on its own. Her family priest promptly wrote to the proprietor ('Natakwale') named Sadoba (short for Sadashiv). On arrival the troupe was duly granted foodgrains from the state granary. Their first performance, the story of Harishchandra, was held in the palace courtyard, but the Rani watched it only for an hour. (Here Godse introduces an ominous note: the play required a clay pot to be broken – an act associated with funerary rites. Although permission was granted to do so, several spectators considered it an ill omen.) The language barrier deterred audience appreciation. At the next performance held only for Marathi-speakers, the Rani was present for three hours. She attended other performances (including *Rasa-krida*) held within the fort for courtiers, and arranged one only for women, mainly the wives of courtiers. After about 15 performances, the troupe was given a farewell banquet and gifts – a pair of shawls and Rs 4,000 to Sadoba, and turbans or pairs of silk-bordered *dhotar*s to some of the actors.[50]

A similar pan-Indian linkage came through the Nutan (New) Sanglikar Mandali, established by Balwantrao Marathe some time before 1870. Marathe was a good actor, adept at swordplay, and a

[50] Vishnubhat Godse, *Maza Pravas: 1857chya Bandachi Hakikat*, Datto Vaman Potdar (ed.), Pune: Vinas Prakashan, 1974, pp. 74–75. Banahatti mentions Vishnudas's actor, Sadashiv Hari Gokhale, who set up his own company in Konkan and toured outside Maharashtra. Banahatti dates Sadoba's split from Vishnudas to 1862 and does not make the Jhansi connection; Banahatti, *Marathi Rangabhumicha Itihas*, pp. 183–85. But collating the information leads us to suspect an earlier split and link Sadoba Natakwale with Vishnudas. This conclusion is also supported by S.G. Malshe, *Gatashataka Shodhitana*, Pune: Pratima Prakashan, 1989, pp. 116–22.

talented composer of narrative poems. Intense competition among theatre companies within Maharashtra prompted him to venture outside. He solved the language problem in the North by composing at least 32 narratives in Hindi. In the South he bypassed the language barrier by relying instead on action, miming, and attractive scenes.[51] The spatial and linguistic incursions of some other theatre companies beyond Maharashtra have already been mentioned.

## Theatre Companies and Audiences

The internal structure of drama companies changed considerably over time. Vishnudas's actors were all Brahmin, mostly literate and some even versed in the shastras. They specialised in specific roles and possessed the requisite skills.[52] Sutradhar was a trained classical singer, and the rakshasas could wield different types of swords – a skill common in the immediate post-Peshwa decades when martial arts formed mandatory physical training for upper-class Brahmin boys. (The possession of weapons was banned after the uprising of 1857.) The company's lifestyle was respectable, Vishnudas being strict about maintaining probity in personal life.

But his management of the company has been critiqued as autocratic. His biographer S.B. Mujumdar (himself an actor and theatre manager) claims that he employed high-caste but low-class actors and treated them badly. Another charge is that the actors who were adored as revered gods and powerful demons at night were made to do menial work during the day, such as cooking and fetching water. Contesting this, Banahatti interprets it as a positive example of a co-operative, self-sufficient community.[53] Important in this context is Vishnudas's difficulty in assembling and training a troupe. The raw material was usually unschooled, as shown by a contract made by one N.B. Kulkarni of Ichalkaranji while enrolling his son in Vishnudas's company in 1853: the lad was to do any work and play any role assigned to him, and accept any payment without demur; also he could be chastised for wrongdoing.[54]

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[51] Banahatti, *Marathi Rangabhumicha Itihas*, pp. 187–90.

[52] Bhave (*Aadya Maharashtra Natakakar*, pp. 129–31) gives a list of Vishnudas's actors and their role specialisation.

[53] Banahatti, *Marathi Rangabhumicha Itihas*, pp. 121–27.

[54] Bhave, *Aadya Maharashtra Natakakar*, p. 137.

But training actors – especially junior ones – was obviously laborious, and the fear of trained actors branching out independently ever-present. One Sitaram Purohit, then residing at Sangli, was taken on as an apprentice in 1855. Vishnudas promised to train him to act and sing in plays such as the *Ramayan* (or generic mythologicals) for a term of 10 years. In his contract, Sitaram agreed to abide by eight conditions, including implicit obedience and loyalty, and a promise not to complain or to pass on his training to others. The contract was signed in the presence of two witnesses who countersigned it.[55]

Unfortunately, such contracts were no guarantee of allegiance; the earnings were tempting enough to prompt break-away companies. This eventuality made Vishnudas lay a complaint before the court of Sangli against 14 actors, enclosing copies of their contracts, and appealing to the state for justice.[56] Sadoba Natakwale had presumably left earlier by himself for a Konkan town.

In terms of management, Ichalkaranjikar Natak Mandali was held to be ideal. The certificate awarded to the company by the court of Baroda in 1880 specially complimented the company's unity and managerial discipline voluntarily observed by its members. Their generally 'decent and pleasant behaviour' apparently contrasted with the atmosphere in other companies.[57]

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Vishnudas charged a high price for his tickets. His two initial performances at Grant Road Theatre had advertised the presumably regular rates: Rs 4 for the Box, Rs 3 for the Stalls, Rs 2 for the Gallery, and Re 1 for the Pit. From the third performance onward, the prices were reduced to Rs 3, 2, 1.5, and 1, respectively, and remained unchanged for the duration of the tour. The first two shows were scheduled for weekdays, to be subsequently replaced by Saturdays in view of Sunday being a public holiday in Mumbai (though not elsewhere).[58] The expense of staging plays at Mumbai's Grant Road Theatre – including rent, furniture, lighting, candles, and printing of advertisements, handbills, and tickets – was substantial.

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[55] *Ibid.*, pp. 135–36.
[56] *Ibid.*, pp. 141–42.
[57] Banahatti, *Marathi Rangabhumicha Itihas*, pp. 417–20.
[58] *Ibid.*, pp. 393, 399, 403.

Additionally, touring involved massive organisation and additional expenses. Vishnudas started his tour of Belgaum and its vicinity in 1861 with a six-month pass for free entry and exit from the government officer in charge of the Sangli-Miraj area. His paraphernalia included 30 Brahmins, five other men, six bullocks, three bullock carts, and one horse.[59]

Other theatre companies charged cheaper tickets, as for example Altekar Hindoo Drama Company which promised in its posters 'a night of amusement' on Saturday, 23 August 1873, with three stories. The performance was to be held in a mansion and offered four classes of seating: sofas (at a rupee and a half), chairs (1 rupee), benches (12 annas), and wooden boards in the raised corridors (8 annas). For women the rates were lower, though the kind of seating was not specified; the tickets were priced at 8 annas for 'respectable' women and 12 annas for dancing girls (*kasabini*) and prostitutes (*nayakini*).[60] This dual pricing for women spectators was not uncommon, though the reason is not clear. One reason offered is that as independent earners prostitutes and women entertainers could afford to pay more; another is that they were 'penalised' for their 'immoral' behaviour.[61]

Although women spectators were made welcome with an offer of separate and 'protected' seating, no efforts were made to provide them special facilities as was done by the Parsi Kaikhushru Kabraji, founder of Victoria Natak Mandali in Mumbai about 1870. In the compound of the temporary theatre constructed near Crawford Market, he had placed cradles where babies slept in the care of the doorkeeper (instructed to rock the cradles if necessary). If this failed, the mothers were informed so that they could come out and take charge of their infants. This was Kabraji's unusually sensitive way of supporting women's right to theatre entertainment.[62]

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The initial venues of the performances – ranging from town squares, lanes partly covered by temporary awnings, to courtyards of mansions –

[59] *Ibid.*, p. 386.

[60] *Ibid.*, p. 421.

[61] The latter possibility is advanced in *Ibid.*, p. 327.

[62] Ratan Rustomji Marshall, *Gujarati Sahitya-Patrakaratva-Rangabhumine Kshetre Parsionu Pradan*, Ahmedabad: Gurjar Grantharatna-karyalaya, 1995, pp. 34–35. I am grateful to Ms Aban Mukherji for this reference.

affected the attitude of the spectators. Vishnudas's success was ensured by the traditional spectator mindset that was not only devout but also participatory. The private *wada* mileu was especially conducive to this. By minimising the physical distance between the actors and spectators in an enclosed space, it allowed a mythological story to be viewed as both a religious experience and a secular human drama.

Vishnudas's most powerful offering was the story of Harishchandra. In 1852 it reduced the Chief of Jamkhandi repeatedly to tears so that the performance had to be stopped and resumed the following evening. It enraged the Chief of Mudhol into actually attempting to attack Vishwamitra with his sword for his perceived cruelty to Harishchandra.[63]

This mindset was too strongly entrenched to be dislodged by the serious prose plays that emerged in the early 1860s – a fact skilfully exploited by a person like Raghoba Apte, manager of Ichalkaranjikar Company, who possessed a canny sense of audience taste. The company's first and most successful prose play was Kirtane's *Thorle Madhavrao Peshwe* (Peshwa Madhavrao the Elder, published in 1861) which ended with Madhavrao's death and his wife Ramabai's self-immolation as a sati.[64] The last scene presented her (portrayed convincingly, by all accounts, by a young, talented stri-party) ready for the sati ceremony – all dressed in white, decked out in ornaments, her whole forehead smeared with kunku, about to enter the burning pyre. Some stri-party actors usually stood on stage for a last *darshan* of the sati and to 'fill her lap' with a *khan* blouse piece, coconut, and rice or wheat grains, according to custom (that is, to place these ingredients ceremonially in the part of her *padar* that covered her stomach); this would bestow on them great religious merit. During one performance at Satara, Raghoba invited some eminent local women to participate in this ceremony as well. From the next show, crowds of women lined up for the ceremony. Eventually this 'filling the lap' ceremony came to dominate the play and lasted over an hour. The princely ladies of Satara, eager for the experience, arranged an exclusive show in a

[63] Bhave, *Aadya Maharashtra Natakakar*, pp. 66–67.

[64] Legend has it that Krishnashastri Chiplunkar was involved enough in rehearsing the play as to show the stri-party boys appropriate actions by wearing a nine-yard sari himself; K.A. Guruji, 'Natakanchi Sthityantare', *Rangabhumi*, Varsha 4, Anka 11, 1913, p. 18.

palace hall lit with chandeliers and decorated with silk drapes. The 'filling the lap' ceremony reached unprecedented proportions, with the royal ladies using pearls instead of grains (presumably appropriated by the actor and/or manager). Many women collected the flowers and left-over grains from the floor to preserve as sacred artefacts at home.[65]

Lest such audience identification seem incongruous or absurd in these 'modern' times of rational sensibility and non-participatory spectatorship, we need only think back a couple of decades. An unexpected articulation of the same, seemingly misplaced spectatorial devotion had surfaced then – a full hundred years after the Satara incident – when television viewers across India had sat cross-legged (and barefoot) on the floor in front of their sets, palms joined together reverentially, as the epic tale of the *Ramayan* unfolded on the small screen. Those Sunday mornings had found the streets deserted and social life at a standstill, proving that the 'traditionalness' of modernity is ever with us.

[65] Guruji, 'Natakanchi Sthityantare', pp. 20–22; Banahatti, *Marathi Rangabhumicha Itihas*, pp. 200–04.

# 2

# Prose Plays

## Reinventing and Founding Traditions (c. 1860)

When the pendulum swung away from mythologicals to the non-religious, non-musical, and importantly non-fantastical extreme, it sought to anchor itself in 'real life' and significantly in the socio-political reformist sphere through social and historical themes. Thus the performative public sphere transited away from a mode which seemingly represented 'low' culture, towards the 'high' culture associated with renowned dramatists of ancient India and the relatively modern West. The move also led to the scripting of narratives of nationalism and social regeneration.

The young English-educated class with modern tastes was now confronted by a lacuna of its own living theatre tradition and drama of literary excellence to compare with its recently imbibed Western counterpart. The response was articulated partly through a nationalistic reclaiming of the ancient Sanskrit drama and partly through borrowing from English plays. Both were absorbed into Marathi literature first through translation and later through adaptation, which then sparked off original creation.[1]

The college students' performance of Sanskrit plays underscored their pride in this literary heritage and a distancing from the Vishnudas tradition. In 1871 Bhatta Narayana's *Veni-samhara*, based on the

[1] This chapter is based largely on Patwardhan, 'Natya-vangmaya' in *Marathi Vangmayacha Itihas*, Khanda 4, pp. 337–463; and Kale, 'Natya-vangmaya' in *Marathi Vangmayacha Itihas,* Khanda 5, Bhag 2, pp. 1–143. References to these works are repeated only where necessary.

Pandav–Kaurav conflict, was staged in Pune's Deccan College, the city's premiere college established with part of the former Peshwa's *dakshina* fund originally intended for honouring learned Brahmins. Vishnushastri Chiplunkar (who acted as Dharmaraj) recited a Sanskrit prologue.[2] A fellow student recited the following English epilogue:

> Though some may laugh us out and set at naught,
> Because they saw no feats, no duels fought,
> No freakish monkey, no delirious yell,
> No Lanka's tyrant fierce with fury fell,
> No absurd songs, no din, no wild attire,
> No meaningless uproar, no senseless ire,
> Let them what they can, indiscretion's tools,
> In turn we laugh them down and deem them fools.
> Illiterate players have usurped the stage,
> With scenes obscene depraved this rising age.[3]

Another fellow student, M.B. Chitale, echoed the sentiment in the English preface to his Marathi social play *Manorama* (1871) which he described as a 'tragi-comedy':

> The boisterous and terrible roarings of antiquarian giants, who never use a soft tone even in their seraglio; the ghastly spectacle of their coming forth from the flashes of flames, even when they enter their own courts in their royal attire; the attitude in which they appear; the affected wailing of the forlorn and desperate consort for the object of her love, and her constant and ill-timed stops while the chorus [i.e. Sutradhar's song] is being sung; the unusual and ridiculous language in which sentiments are expressed; and above all, the disproportionate distribution of elegance and harshness of speech; are one and all repulsive to the sight and insulting to the ear.[4]

Thus the educated elite traversed a significant cultural distance from Vishnudas's dramatic innovation within just three decades, their ultimate destination being not Anglicisation, but the forging of a

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[2] Kulkarni, *Marathi Rangabhumi*, p. 42.

[3] Cited in Dandekar, *Pauranik Natake*, p. 89. The student's name was K.P. Gadgil.

[4] Mahadev Balkrishna Chitale, 'Preface' in *Manorama Natak*, Pune: Dnyana-chakshu Press, 1877 (1871), p ii.

new cultural identity. This was achieved by first retrieving the 'golden Sanskrit literary past' and then adding new, Western literary inputs. Tradition was simultaneously founded and re-invented. That the new identity was forged in Marathi but advertised in English – for example, through Chitale's elaborate English preface coupled with a shorter Marathi one – suggests an attempt to impress British professors and officials who aimed to create Macaulay's 'brown Sahibs' – 'Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect'.[5]

The new prose play, with a limited 'refined' appeal perforce coexisted with the popular mythologicals. A testimonial (alluded to earlier) was awarded by the court of Baroda to Ichalkaranjikar Mandali for its attempt to 'revive the dramatic art which had advanced very far in our country during ancient times, but had subsequently declined'. This Marathi document (of 28 May 1880) was signed by 39 eminent court officials of Baroda, including non-Maharashtrians such as Dewan Bahadur R. Raghunathrao and assistant Dewan T. Madhavrao. The main thrust of the document was the company's choice of sensible, secular prose plays thus far eclipsed by mythological fantasy:

> What we [usually] see is things like the dreadful screams of rakshasas, a disruption of the general flow by the sutradhar intervening midway in the speeches or laments by the other characters and carrying them to completion through his songs, and the repulsive and vulgar antics of the vidushak.[6]

The immediate impulse for the development came from English drama – mostly as a literary genre – and the ubiquitous Parsi theatre, with a permanent base in Mumbai. The undeniable popularity of Parsi Urdu theatre in Maharashtra and beyond pivoted on spectacle – ranging from the sublime to the gaudy, and from the miraculous to the mundane – and a rhythmic dialogue inviting imitation. But certain basic differences were noteworthy. Parsi theatre employed 'poets' commissioned to write plays attuned to the changing audience tastes. It was a professional and profit-making enterprise geared to pleasing

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[5] Macaulay (1935), cited in Lynn Zastoupil and Martin Moir (eds), *The Great Indian Education Debate: Documents Relating to the Orientalist-Anglicist Controversy, 1781–1843*, Richmond: Curzon Press, 1999, p. 161.

[6] Cited in Banahatti, *Marathi Rangabhumicha Itihas*, pp. 417–20.

the spectators; in the process, the original script could be changed as and when required. Fidelity to the text was not a consideration.[7]

Marathi theatre functioned within an essentially divergent paradigm. The playwright – frequently a noted writer or journalist – enjoyed a high status, and his text commanded faithful adherence, within the practical constraints of the stage. Again, Parsi theatre remained a medium of entertainment. Marathi prose playwrights aimed at literary excellence, or at least acceptability; the requisite skills in stagecraft came later. It was never a rootless form of pure entertainment, but an integral part of culture, an artistic link to social life.

But the process percolated through English drama, its earliest conduits being the amateur dramatic clubs of students, especially in Mumbai's famed Elphinstone College (Bombay's Presidency College, renamed after its governor). Parsi Elphinstone Dramatic Society and Kalidas Elphinstone Society, composed of students and ex-students, spearheaded the staging of English plays, coached by visiting British actors. Interestingly the traversal from Sanskrit to Marathi was mediated by English: Kalidas Society, founded with Bhau Daji's active leadership, staged a lavish performance of *Shakuntalam* in Monier Williams' English translation, probably in the 1860s. The specially designed costumes recreated the ancient Indian milieu: Shakuntala's bark garments were imported from Madras (now Chennai) at a cost of Rs 400, and two wagonloads of flowers were brought from Pune to decorate the stage.[8] Splendid effects were also provided for the group's production of the translated *Vikram and Urvashi*.[9] Dr R.G. Bhandarkar, eminent Sanskritist and Indologist at Pune's Deccan College, encouraged students to perform the plays they studied, and also used recitation from Sanskrit and English plays as a pedagogical device.[10]

Influential sections of Mumbai's community, including Sorabjee Jamsetji Jeejeebhoy and Jagannath Shankarshet, as well as visiting dignitaries like the Maharaja Holkar, supported these activities. Elphinstone College also set up Shakespeare Society in 1864 to produce one play annually within the college premises. In 1867

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[7] Kale, 'Natya-vangmaya', pp. 5–7.
[8] Kulkarni, *Marathi Rangabhumi*, pp. 40–41.
[9] Mehta, 'Bombay's Theatre World', pp. 251–78.
[10] *Ibid.*

*The Taming of the Shrew* was specially performed in honour of Sir Bartle Frere, Governor of the Bombay Presidency, and his lady.[11]

## Translations and Adaptations

The educated generation expected of drama more than a religious experience camouflaged as entertainment (or the other way around): it was to be a narrative of social or historical relevance – with well-rounded human characters behaving naturally – and preferably imparting a social or political message.

The new sensibility was channelled successively through translations, adaptations, and original creations. The 'translation era', as the decades after 1850 were derogatorily labelled, actually denoted an important project. It was an entirely legitimate, sincere, and also successful attempt to enrich Marathi literature, especially prose, by inducting into it themes borrowed from various genres: Sanskrit and English plays, as well as English novels, biographies, and histories, which gradually took root. Four decades after the transition of political power Marathi prose was strengthened enough to equal the volume of the earlier verse compositions. Journalism and creative literature flourished; the latter largely through translation.

This felt inadequacy of Marathi and its inferiority vis-à-vis English aroused contempt among many college students, including G.N. Madgavkar, author of an early original Marathi play. Ironically, it was British missionary teachers who encouraged a serious study of Marathi language and literature – sometimes by instituting awards.[12] State impetus came from the Department of Public Instruction through Dakshina Prize Committee, set up in 1851 (with part of the Peshwa's dakshina fund). Private associations also provided encouragement. But progress was perceived as slow by the ambitious. In 1871 M.B. Chitale found it 'extremely deplorable to observe that Marathi literature ... is as yet in its infancy'; and that it would be 'long before it can reach that height of excellence, which it is the duty of the educated natives of this country, to try their best to attain'.[13]

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[11] *Ibid.*

[12] Cited in Anant Kakba Priolkar, 'Prastavana' in *Madgavkaranche Sankalit Vangmaya*, Khanda 1, A.K. Priolkar and S.G. Malshe (eds), Mumbai: Mumbai Marathi Grantha-sangrahalaya, 1968, p. 22.

[13] Chitale, 'Preface' in *Manorama Natak*, p. i.

*Translations of Sanskrit Plays*

The Brahmin literati's facility with Sanskrit and Dakshina Prize Committee's efforts yielded a profusion of Sanskrit plays in translation. The secretary or 'Reviser' of the committee scrutinised the translations, published suitable ones, and offered awards to their authors.

The classic dramatists, led by Kalidas, soon claimed centre-stage. Krishnashastri Chiplunkar, the Reviser, published some original Sanskrit texts, with corresponding Marathi translation on the opposite page, attempting a multiple agenda – to retrieve ancient Sanskrit texts from relative neglect, allow discerning readers to assess the meticulousness of the translation, and help university students as well as civil service candidates in their Sanskrit examinations. Interestingly, Chiplunkar and his fellow revisers repeatedly stressed the glories of Sanskrit, and in judging the accuracy of the translation, exposed the relative poverty and inadequacy of Marathi, voicing the prevalent educated perspective.[14] Significantly, it was Krishnashastri's son Vishnushastri, the self-styled 'Shivaji of the Marathi language', who was generally credited with having substantially enriched the Marathi prose style.

Of the classical Sanskrit plays Kalidas's *Vikramorvashiyam* and *Abhidnyana-Shakuntalam* were serialised in monthly magazines in the mid-1850s. These were followed by the publication of Parashurampant Godbole's six translations – one each of six major Sanskrit playwrights from Bhavabhuti to Shri Harsha – between 1857 and 1872. Importantly, his conscious shift of emphasis from Sanskrit to Marathi achieved the major objective of refining literary Marathi alongside fidelity to the original. Thus his works moved from 'translation' to 'trans-creation'. His enormously popular plays ran into at least two editions each; several were performed on stage, and many of his verse passages found their way into textbooks as models of Marathi poetry. Godbole's norms were followed by others, with Kalidas being subjected to repeated translations. Significantly B.P. Kirloskar founded his tradition of sangit natak with a Marathi *Shakuntal* in 1880, and Deval succeeded him with similar tactics.

*Translations and Adaptations of English Plays*

The rapidity with which Shakespeare and other dramatists were subjected – sometimes repeatedly – to translations and adaptations

[14] Patwardhan, 'Natya-vangmaya', pp. 358–59.

further endorsed what Gauri Viswanathan has called 'the irony that English literature appeared as a subject in the curriculum of the colonies long before it was institutionalized in the home country'.[15] She has also linked the education of English literature in India to the colonial political–administrative imperatives and as an instrument of British ideological control.

As a testimony to Shakespeare's dominance, 26 of his plays were translated by 1913, some more than once.[16] Although treated mainly as works of literature, they were in demand from theatre companies, such as 'Aryoddharak' (broadly, uplifters of the Aryas), 'Shahu-nagar-vasi' (residents of Satara), and 'Natya-kala-prasarak' (promoter of the dramatic art) which specialised in such plays, especially Shakespeare. The first translations of *Othello* (1867) by Mahadevshastri Kolhatkar and of *The Tempest* (1875) by N.J. Kirtane (brother of V.J. Kirtane) were regarded as standard; they retained the original names and cultural backgrounds of the characters. Intended to introduce Shakespeare to the Marathi reader, they were clearly unsuitable for the stage, except on an experimental basis.

The process posed fresh dilemmas. Translations from Sanskrit were easily understood and welcomed by all, but inherent in the literal translations from English was the core problem of conveying an alien culture to the Maharashtrian middle class unacquainted even with the small and insular British community in India. Vishnushastri Chiplunkar passed heavy strictures on such clumsy attempts. He praised Kolhatkar's *Othello* as 'an excellent translation – far surpassing expectations', but wondered what Marathi readers would make of phrases like 'the demoness with grey-green eyes' (for 'green-eyed monster') or 'black-coloured renunciation' (possibly a mistranslation of 'black vengeance').[17] He deemed the exercise futile: such a translation could be understood only by the readers who knew English, and they would rather read the original.

The various translations of the same play co-existed in relative harmony. The standard translation of *Hamlet* was G.G. Agarkar's

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[15] Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 4.

[16] S.B. Mujumdar, 'Shakespearechi Natake va Tyanche Bhashantar', *Rangabhumi*, August 1913, pp. 1–3.

[17] Vishnu Krishna Chiplunkar, *Nibandha-mala*, V.V. Sathe (ed.), Pune: S.N. Joshi, 1926, pp. 167, 176.

*Vikar-vilasit* (1883), to which were added Govindrao Kanitkar's *Virasen* (also in 1883) and A.S. Barve's *Himmat-bahadur*. Theatre companies usually followed Agarkar's version, with substantial borrowings from the others.

Literal translations gradually gave way to adaptations, such as V.M. Mahajani's *Tara* (*Cymbeline*, first performed in 1877 and published in 1879). Even these were not always easy for readers or spectators to follow. In Chiplunkar's words, although Mahajani 'has exerted himself to make Tara a Marathi "lady", her speech and behaviour are bound to be tinged with English! How can her original conditioning by the Great Bard disappear completely just by piercing her nose and ears, and dressing her in a sari instead of a gown?'[18] For him the sole benefit of the exercise was for theatre companies to replace the former rakshas-dominated plays.

Adaptations of English authors proliferated, with N.H. Bhagwat's *Shashikala ani Ratnapal* (*Romeo and Juliet*, 1882), a dramatisation of Walter Scott's novel *Kenilworth* as *Prataprao ani Chandranana* (1883), V.V. Kelkar's *Tratika* (*The Taming of the Shrew*, 1892), and S.M. Paranjape's *Manajirao* (*Macbeth*, 1898). Paranjape, a famous essayist and editor of the paper *Kaal*, also rendered into Marathi Addison's *Cato* as *Ramdevrao* (1906) and Schiller's *Robbers* as *Bhimrao* (1907). G.B. Deval's highly appreciated adaptations included *Zunzarrao* (Othello, 1890), and *Falgunrao* (1894, based on Murphy's *All in the Wrong*, which became *Sangit Samshaya-kallol* in 1916).

Unusually V.J. Kirtane modelled his *Jayapal* in 1865 on Biblical Joseph (inevitably without his coat of many colours) and discussed in his English preface the transition from a Hebrew to a Maharashtrian setting:

> It is not the dramatist's business to draw a picture of the outward man, to depict the everyday life of this nation or that nation, to show what costumes the Hebrews wore, or what houses the Marathas lived in . . . He principally concerns himself with the inner being . . . It is with the feelings and passions of man alone . . . that I have concerned myself in this work.[19]

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[18] *Ibid.*, p. 550.

[19] Vinayak Janardan Kirtane, 'Preface' in *Thorle Madhavrao Peshwe va Jayapal Hi Natake*, Pune: V.N. Kirtane and M.D. Kirtane, 1927 (1861 and 1865), pp. 67–69. The story has frequently been wrongly identified as based on that of Job.

Unfortunately the deflection of interest from meticulous translation to adaptation meant a move towards low-brow and populist fare in the form of farces, which suited the practical compulsions of theatre companies.

## Small Prose Beginnings: Farces

The origin and popularity of the farce are attributed variously to the English amateur practice of such offerings for English spectators and the need for a touch of social realism and critique appended to a mythological. Ultimately 'farce' came to serve as an umbrella term for everything from the ridiculous to the sublime.

Officially the first farce was announced on 19 January 1856 by Amarchand-wadikar Company in a Marathi weekly. A performance of the 'entertaining akhyan of *Krishna-janma* (The Birth of Krishna)', scheduled at Grant Road Theatre, was to be followed by a 'new, humorous and excellent farce, aimed at the public good', though its title or theme was not divulged.[20]

Unofficially, the farce had emerged earlier, during a mythological show in Mumbai. In the first interval, an old, distraught gentleman rushed up on the stage and shouted for the manager at whom he then raved and ranted because his 15-year-old bride had been seduced by a smart young man; the couple had eloped and apparently come to see the play. The sympathetic spectators sided with the old man who, with the manager's help, detected the errant wife in the women's section of the audience and dragged her on to the stage. The manager advised the old man to keep a closer eye on his wife, and addressed the audience on the evils of marriages so unequal in age. He finally revealed that these two were the company's actors and the little scene had been enacted for the edification of the audience. The spectators thoroughly enjoyed the episode, though it proved counter-productive by stopping women from coming to the company's performances. Such an episode was never attempted again.[21]

The instant popularity of the farce stemmed from its short, compact structure, realism, and humour. Banahatti sees as its main attraction the arrival of contemporary life on stage for the first time, in

[20] Banahatti, *Marathi Rangabhumicha Itihas*, pp. 173–74, 414.
[21] Dandekar, *Samajik Natake*, pp. 11–13.

competition with gods and demons. But its frequently vulgar humour incurred theatre critic A.V. Kulkarni's charge that it descended to the level of a tamasha.[22] This was undoubtedly true, because tough competition led the companies to appeal to the lowest common denominator. Thus in 1873 Altekar Hindu Natak Company advertised two rather gory mythological plays – with a sword fight in one, and in the other a decapitation scene (with the head and the torso separately displayed) – and also promised as an additional attraction the 'farce' of *Narayanrao Peshwe Yancha Mrityu* (The Death of Peshwa Narayanrao). This last promised to show Narayanrao's stomach being slit open to display its contents – not only his intestines, but also the sweet rice delicacy he had last consumed.[23]

Amarchand-wadikar and then Cheulwadikar Companies started staging farces regularly, after the conclusion of the main mythological, with other companies following suit. The wide-ranging contents of the 'farce' encompassed even serious or tragic historical skits, as already seen. The dubious nomenclature was perhaps derived from the Sanskrit 'prahasan' in a bit of mistranslation. The popularity of farces peaked from 1870 to 1890, and then lost their niche to musical plays and serious prose plays. In M.G. Ranade's words, 'Just as the farces superseded the interest in the old Puranic Dramas, they have been in turn succeeded by dramas which refer to social and political subjects'.[24]

Originally farces were neither written down nor published; each actor was given only a script of his own dialogue; subsequent publication was a matter of pooling together the individual scripts. As the real author's name was not known, the farces either remained anonymous, or carried the publisher's name as the author.[25]

The line between farces and other short plays was frequently blurred: a Shakespearean comedy in translation or a serious short play both qualified, if performed after the conclusion of a long mythological. Farces have been regarded variously as a sub-type of either

[22] Kulkarni, *Marathi Rangabhumi*, p. 36.

[23] Banahatti, *Marathi Rangabhumicha Itihas*, pp. 245, 421, 424.

[24] Ranade, 'A Note', p. 41.

[25] Bhimrao Kulkarni, 'Prastavana' in Bhimrao Kulkarni (ed.), *Marathi Faars: Ekonisavya Shatakaatil Pratinidhik Nivadak Faarsancha Sangraha*, Pune: Maharashtra Sahitya Parishad, 1987, p. 18.

mythological plays with which they enjoyed a symbiotic relationship, or social plays into which they evolved.[26] Here I have treated them generally as prose plays and classified them broadly according to their content: farces designed only for entertainment are considered in this section, those with social comment or historical themes are discussed along with other plays of the respective genres.

The earliest amusing farce, identified only as 'Nakkal' (in this context, probably 'mime', 1870), was appended to the tragic historical play about Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi, *Zashiche Raniche Natak*, by V.M. Nashikakar and others. Of its 24 scenes, the last nine comprise this farce, following upon Lakshmibai's death in the main play.[27]

More in keeping with the inane farce was the very popular *Anarshacha Manoranjak Faars*, an 'entertaining' farce about a sweet delicacy.[28] It centres on a poor old Brahmin villager whose wife, worried about having to feed their starving children, refuses to make him the delicacy he craves for. He travels to another village, is tricked and exploited by a young woman who runs an eatery, and finally takes revenge. *Basundicha Faars* (a farce about a delicacy made with condensed milk, by Ramchandra Yashwant, 1886), predictably revolves around misadventures caused by a similar craving.[29] *Zopi Gelela Jaga Zala* (A Sleeping Man Awakens, anonymous, 1896), based on the *Arabian Nights*, offers more innocent – albeit equally inane – fun.[30] This is the story of an upright man who is disenchanted with selfish and deceitful people. He is transformed by a magic potion into the king by night, returning to his own house by day. The real king who is instrumental in this, finally reveals all, and gives him wealth and also a wife.

The simplistic plot, crude stratagems, elementary humour, and slapstick in these farces are easy to imagine – as is the taste of the audience who savoured these.

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[26] The former view is expressed by Banahatti (*Marathi Rangabhumicha Itihas*, p. 286), and the latter by Patwardhan ('Natya-vangmaya', pp. 444–46).

[27] Kulkarni, 'Prastavana', pp. 16–17, 19. The text of the farce is reproduced in Kulkarni (ed.), *Marathi Faars*, pp. 1–16.

[28] The text, by D.V. Joglekar (1885), is reproduced in Kulkarni (ed.), *Marathi Faars*, pp. 128–41.

[29] Reproduced in Kulkarni (ed.), *Marathi Faars*, pp. 212–23.

[30] *Ibid.*, pp. 388–408.

## Original Prose or 'Bookish' Plays

The written text asserted its valence, if not primacy, with the advent of prose plays. Their publication in book form (which labelled them 'bookish' plays) and stage performance represented a decisive shift from action- to language-oriented plays.

Among the earliest original plays, great popularity was claimed by allegories serving as a bridge between the old mythologicals and the new social plays. The trend started with the popular translation of an 11th-century Sanskrit work, *Prabodha-chandrodaya* (broadly, Rise of Good Advice, 1851), intended to make Advaita philosophy intelligible and interesting. Two of the original Marathi allegories that followed in 1854 and 1871 were openly nationalistic efforts to stir readers and spectators to action. Both had as their protagonist Vichar (the faculty of thought) who travels abroad with his family and visits other countries. R.H. Bhagwat's *Sayujya-sadana* (1867) cast the allegory of man's struggle to vanquish undesirable passions and his quest for spiritual bliss in the mould of Maratha history, with Shivajiraje as the divinity to whom Jivajirao (from *jiv* or the life-force) ultimately surrenders with the help of Bodhajirao (from *bodh* or moral instruction). Arguably the strangest of the allegories was *Vanhirath Rajache Natak* (1868) peopled by individuals such as Vanhirath (a rail engine), Drivar (the driver) who causes an accident under the influence of alcohol, and Signalika (the signal). The Company Government and the Traffic Department also figure as major characters.

From these it was a significant step to serious social plays. The earliest was Jotirao Phule's literary debut *Tritiya Ratna* (The Third Gem, 1855). His was the first and strongest subaltern voice raised against Brahmin dominance or 'Brahminocracy'. His copious writings were aimed at the awakening and social rehabilitation of the lower castes, especially the 'untouchables', mainly through education. But given the contemporary Brahmin hegemony, the play remained not only unpublished but also unknown until 1979, thus failing to have the expected impact.[31] Phule openly attributes this to discrimination by Brahmins who suppressed lower-caste protest. In his booklet *Gulamgiri* (Slavery, 1873) on the same theme he says:

[31] Jotirao Phule, *Tritiya Ratna* in *Mahatma Phule Samagra Vangmaya*, Y.D. Phadke (ed.), Mumbai: Maharashtra Rajya Sahitya ani Sanskriti Mandal, 1991, pp. 1–32.

> In 1855 I had submitted to Dakshina Prize Committee a short play describing how Brahmins devour ignorant Shudras by telling them self-serving lies about religion and how Christian missionaries impart to those ignorant Shudras true knowledge on the basis of their impartial religion to lead them on the true path. But the European members [of the Committee] could not prevail against the opposition of the Brahmin members; so the Committee did not select my book.[32]

Phule's theme is the monopolistic Brahmin priests' exploitation of poor illiterate peasants and the value of English secular education as the panacea for the downtrodden. The economical cast includes a young Kunbi or peasant woman (who wants to avert any ill befalling the child she is carrying), her husband, a Brahmin priest–astrologer, and a European padre. A Muslim man puts in a brief appearance to discuss the comparative merits of the major Indian religions. But the most important character is Vidushak who serves as the author's spokesman and comments on the action throughout, without interacting with, or being noticed by, the others – almost like a Greek chorus. The priest extorts labour and (borrowed) money from the couple (named only Woman and Husband) for the supposedly essential rituals to be performed not only by himself but also his entire family. The Christian padre makes them aware of this, Vidushak unravels all the intrigues, and finally the peasant couple decide to join the schools opened by Phule. In style and content the play resembles much of Phule's other impassioned, dialogical, and polemical writings. Playwright G.P. Deshpande describes the play as a revolutionary articulation of the internal conflicts that cause a society's defeat and as 'the first consciously political play written in India'.[33]

The mainstream social reform discourse, however, revolved around the upper castes which tapped theatre's discursive potential as the new mass medium more effective than the printed word (especially newspapers and novels) given the low level of literacy. The reformist segment of the Brahmin – and Brahmin-dominated – society mainly

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[32] *Ibid*., p. 182. The term 'slavery' is here employed to indicate upper-caste oppression of the lower castes.

[33] Cited in Makarand Sathe, *Marathi Rangabhumichya Tis Ratri: Ek Samajik–Rajakiya Itihas*, Khanda 1, Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 2011, p. 37.

combated its oppressive patriarchal customs. Girls were married before puberty, to be yoked to wifehood and motherhood at puberty. Widows, rendered redundant, were disfigured by shaving their heads, marginalised, and penalised for their perceived 'sins' (which had incurred widowhood) through degrading treatment within the family. Education, or even simple literacy, was denied to women as being a potentially emancipatory measure which they would misuse (for example by writing letters to male strangers to arrange trysts). The core issues for reform therefore addressed these disabilities and also dowry demands, conspicuous expenditure on weddings, and marriages of elderly men to young girls.

Some of these issues attracted Madgavkar, long regarded as the initiator of social plays. A prolific writer, he was a teacher in one of Mumbai's famous missionary schools, and associated with the city's reformist circles that included M.G. Ranade, and his own students like Bhau Daji.[34] Impelled by a reformist zeal and aided by a wide outreach, Madgavkar sought to disseminate new ideas and information through all genres from essays to dialogues, and local history to plays.

Madgavkar's *Vyavaharopayogi Natak* (registered with the English title 'Drama on a Practical Subject', 1857) was, in his own words, 'a short essay of practical utility expressed in dramatic form'.[35] The hortatory play pleads for reasonable marriage customs. The protagonist Trimbakji, a clerk with a modest salary, tries to live within his means, educate his children, and postpone their marriages. But his conventional wife Chimabai pressurises him through the family priest and friends to arrange their marriages early and expensively, leading to financial ruin. Madgavkar's second play, *Bhojana-bandhu Paan-tambakhu* (literally, Betel Leaf and Tobacco: Companions to a Meal, but registered as 'Dramatic Readings about Betel Leaf and Tobacco', 1860) warns the readers about the ill effects of these popular addictions.[36] Devoid of dramatic interest, the play unfolds as a series of dialogues between the protagonist Ramrao, a well-to-do

[34] Priolkar, 'Prastavana'. Madgavkar's 17 original pieces ranged over subjects didactic and reformist, as well as purely informative.

[35] Govind Narayan Madgavkar, *Vyavaharopayogi Natak* in S.G. Malshe (ed.), *Madgavkaranche Sankalit Vangmaya*, Khanda 2, Mumbai: Mumbai Marathi Grantha-sangrahalaya, 1969, p. 175.

[36] Madgavkar, *Bhojana-bandhu Paan-tambakhu* in Malshe (ed.), *Madgavkaranche Sankalit Vangmaya*, pp. 197–230.

gentleman addicted to snuff, and his rather precocious daughter Varu who successfully prevails upon him – with her mother's support – to give it up.[37] Brahmin hypocrisy and double standards as a subtext in Madgavkar's plays resonate with Phule's numerous dialogues on the topic.

These rudimentary attempts to deploy drama for social reform lacked literary merit, and failed as an effective counterpart to the novel of social criticism. Even the first full-length, original social play, M.B. Chitale's *Manorama Natak* (1871), unfortunately became somewhat counter-productive. In his English preface to the play, Chitale expresses his confidence that:

> [D]ramatic composition is one of the most important and interesting branches of literature [with] a decided superiority over all the rest in representing vice and virtue, in obliterating the fatal customs, that very frequently take a deep root in society, in improving our sentiments, in refining our language and manners, in placing vividly before the spectator what novels and poetry have to leave for his imagination to conceive, and in fostering healthy public opinion.[38]

Chitale's reformist ambition was to 'eradicate evil customs firmly rooted in society', specifically early or mismatched marriages and enforced widowhood that combined to lead young women astray. The message unfolds through the lives of young Manorama and her three childhood friends who encounter dreadful problems. Two of the friends are soon widowed, the third is dissatisfied with her young but sickly bookworm of a husband. The three girls succumb to temptations of the flesh at the instigation of an outwardly respectable procuress. One gets pregnant and is later imprisoned for infanticide. The second elopes with a man of dubious morals, is driven to prostitution, and is finally robbed and murdered. The third friend also becomes a prostitute, contracts a venereal disease, and dies a horrible death in a hospital. Manorama alone resists the enticements of the procuress during her reformer husband's absence for higher studies in England.

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[37] One of these students was Padmanji, later a Christian convert and reformer; Baba Padmanji, *Arunodaya*, Mumbai: Bombay Tract and Book Society, 1963 (1884), p. 120. Interestingly Madgavkar himself weaned some of his students away from this addiction.

[38] Chitale, 'Preface' in *Manorama*, p. i.

This husband's opponents spread the rumour that he is dead, driving Manorama to attempt suicide. His timely arrival saves her and the two are happily united.

As a 'senior student of Deccan College', Chitale was obviously conversant with Sanskrit and European dramatic conventions. Fired by the avowed aim of 'holding a mirror up to nature', he addressed the desideratum of realism and originality; hence his stress on ordinary people rather than elevated mythic personages.[39] While consciously flouting the Sanskrit convention of avoiding tragic endings or deaths, he retained the Sanskrit practice of inserting erotic verses, with explicit descriptions of the female body. Chitale's candid articulation of women's sexual needs incurred a charge of obscenity.

The discourse on widowhood also elicited Anna Martand Joshi's popular *Sangit Saubhagya-Rama athava Vaidhavya-duhkha Vimochan* (Eradication of the Sufferings of Widowhood, 1890). It realistically portrays young Rama's suffering as a widow and her remarriage to a capable young man under the encouragement of the famous reformer Vishnushastri Pandit who promoted widow remarriage (and who figures as one of the characters in the play). It also reflects the entire controversy regarding the reform issue.[40]

The practice of marrying young girls to old widowers, mainly for money, was portrayed in *Kanya-vikraya Dushparinam* (The Ill Effects of Selling Daughters, 1895) by M.V. Shingane and B.B. Acharya.[41] But by far the most memorable play on the topic was G.B. Deval's *Sangit Sharada* (1899), discussed in a later chapter.

The strong conservative backlash was not slow in coming. R.S. Abhyankar vehemently opposed leniency towards widows in his *Prabodha-vidyut athava Swaira-sakesha* (broadly, The Lightning of Moral Instruction, or A Licentious Long-haired Widow, 1871). The title is prompted by the dramatist's belief that the play's moral instruction would serve as a flash of lightning to illuminate the path for those groping in the darkness of lust. This clearly didactic exercise relates to the conduct of long-haired widows – who have not been subjected to mandatory head-shaving and are therefore allegedly inclined towards immoral behaviour. The protagonist is just such a

[39] *Ibid.*, p. ii.

[40] Dandekar, *Samajik Natake*, pp. 292–93. Although a musical, the play is discussed here because it belongs within the reform discourse.

[41] Dandekar, *Samajik Natake*, p. 296.

widow who leaves her morally degraded second husband and goes off to live with another man who later finds himself unable to cope with the expense of maintaining her alongside his family. He commits suicide – as does the widow. His protestation of reformism notwithstanding, the playwright condemns all widows with unshaven heads and relishes detailed descriptions of their immoral behaviour.[42]

More popular was N.H. Bhagwat's farce, *Mor LL.B. Prahasan athava Aprabuddha-tarun-kriya ani Tyanche Dushparinam* (The Doings of Immature Young Men and Their Evil Effects, 1882), a virulently anti-reform play that heaps on men's modern education the conservative critique usually reserved for women's education.[43] The young protagonist Moreshwar (fondly known as Mor) of Mumbai, about to obtain a law degree, is the perfect caricature of a social reformer the conservatives loved to hate. He is emasculated by his studies; Anglicised in speech, dress, and customs like drinking; adept at speechifying about social reform; and also hypocritical. Although over-eager to marry, the enfeebled Mor is unable to consummate the marriage. The seven-scene play ends with the bride's mother praying to God to save young girls from such enfeebled husbands and from the brides' inevitable temptation to adultery.

By far the most popular enunciation of the Tilakite social conservatism came from N.B. Kanitkar. His relatively well-crafted *Taruni-shikshan-natika* (A Short Play about Young Women's Education, 1886) purports to predict the dire future of a society that fails to check the pernicious trend of women's modern, 'ornamental' education accompanied by freedom of thought and action, as also the (male and female) reformers' addiction to drink in a misguided imitation of Western ways.[44] In his lengthy, polemical preface, he advocates the 'appropriate' type and degree of education for women, citing with admiration *Kesari's* ideological position. His self-proclaimed 'progressive' argument is self-serving: women should look beautiful, be amiable and pliable, and serve their husbands who would then protect them; but women who compete with men in any way forfeit the right to be respected.

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[42] *Ibid.*, p. 282.

[43] The text is reproduced in Kulkarni (ed.), *Marathi Faars*, pp. 17–48.

[44] Narayan Bapuji Kanitkar, *Taruni-shikshana-natika*, Pune: N.B. Kanitkar, 1890 (1886).

The female protagonist Chimani, daughter of Raosaheb, is enrolled in the girls' 'Arya Mahila Hotel' which teaches the boys' curriculum. Toying with her homework one evening, she repulses the advances of her husband who steals into her room, and further derides him – in her affected, English-inflected Marathi – for being uncouth and unlovable. Supported by her father, she ultimately sues for divorce and proposes marriage to her young teacher who 'sensibly' spurns her. Chimani's classmates are shown partying, drinking, and ballroom-dancing. One of them, a child widow, is widowed again after marrying Raosaheb who is older than he pretends to be and soon dies. Another friend runs away with her paramour to join a theatre company. Chimani nonchalantly plans a trip to England.

The contemporary spectator immediately recognised Chimani as a caricature of Rakhmabai whose husband had filed a court case for restitution of conjugal rights in 1884; the case dragged on until settled out of court in 1888, after which Rakhmabai went to Britain to study medicine.[45] The arguments made in court – and reported in all the newspapers – are reproduced selectively in the play. Another *bête noire* freely parodied here is Pandita Ramabai who championed the women's cause through her Arya Mahila Samaj established in 1882. So popular was the play with conservative spectators that every remark which ridiculed reform and reformers drew wild applause.[46]

Kanitkar's *Sammati-kayadyache Natak* (A Play about the Consent Act, 1892) was published and performed a year after the stormy passage of the controversial Age of Consent Act.[47] The play reads like a summary of the entire controversy, ridiculing the preaching reformers who fail to act upon their promises and 'learned women' dominated by 'Bhagavati Shweta-vastrabai' (or the respected lady in white) – a barely veiled reference to Pandita Ramabai Saraswati.

The attractive conservative theme of women's education as a bogey was essayed also by the anonymous author of *Visave Shatak athava Stri-prabalya Prahasan* (The 20th Century, or A Farce about Women's

[45] See Kosambi, 'Resisting Conjugality' in *Crossing Thresholds*, pp. 237–73.

[46] Varerkar, *Maza Nataki Sansar*, p. 31.

[47] Narayan Bapuji Kanitkar, *Sammati-kayadyache Natak*, Pune: Shri Shivaji Chhapkhana, 1892. For a discussion of the act, see Kosambi, 'Child Brides and Child Mothers' in *Crossing Thresholds*, pp. 274–310.

Dominance, 1886).[48] The opening scene is set in the Female College where the elderly and widowed principal, Gopikabai, congratulates her three students (all wearing stockings and shoes, and carrying books – detested symbols of Anglicisation) on having completed their studies, and grants them permission to marry men of their choice. Two already have suitors. The third, married in childhood, awaits the passage of the divorce law (to be rid of the husband she has reduced to a trembling servant). Gopikabai longs to marry a young man. Ultimately the four weddings take place and the play ends with all the husbands lamenting the female mindset that has reduced them to such straits. The parody pivots on gender role reversal: the oppression acceptable in the case of women becomes a source of fear, pity, and humour if meted out to men. It is the 'man-bites-dog' twist that creates a sensation.

In the field of drama, the social conservatives seemed to have won the day, in sharp contrast to the novel which was consciously and effectively deployed as a vehicle for social reform.

*Historical and Other Themes*

A paradigm shift among 'bookish' plays was wrought by V.J. Kirtane's historical *Thorle Madhavrao Peshwe* (Peshwa Madhavrao the Elder, 1861), written during his college days at Mumbai. Though not the first original play, this episodic life-story of the capable and revered Peshwa made a deep impact, and established historical drama as a popular and powerful force. Gesturing to the intense public preoccupation with Maratha history, it conveys a barely hidden political message underscored by a modern Sutradhar informing Vidushak in Act I, Scene 1, that he intends to lead the spectators to a 'real' Maratha durbar – not a durbar 'where the orders of the inhabitants of a foreign island prevail, and where kings – mere caged parrots – have not seen even the shadow of their own power'.[49]

The amateurish play traces young Madhavrao's life from his investiture as the Peshwa, to his durbars, his planning of successful military campaigns leading to a stable Maratha kingdom after the disastrous defeat at Panipat, and ends with his early death. Two of its iconic scenes were Madhavrao's farewell kiss to his wife before departing on

[48] The text is reproduced in Kulkarni (ed.), *Marathi Faars*, pp. 192–211.
[49] Kirtane, *Thorle Madhavrao Peshwe.*

a military campaign (such kissing scenes became mandatory in later historical plays, while remaining generally absent in social plays) and Ramabai's sati ceremony following his death. The play provided a standard format for the historical genre – a series of scenes outlining the career of historical figures and their special achievements, ending in their death or some other climactic event. As a pioneering play it attracted a great deal of attention and assistance. It was believed that Krishnashastri Chiplunkar rehearsed the female impersonators in their roles, wearing a sari himself (as mentioned earlier).[50]

Peshwa history was an unending source of dramatic inspiration. V.S. Chhatrye's *Narayanrao Peshwe Yanche Natak* (A Play about Peshwa Narayanrao, 1870) was based on the historical figure of Madhavrao's younger brother, but written in the mythological idiom. The play is presented through an akhyan-style narrative, replete with songs – sung not only by the major characters like Narayanrao, Raghoba, and Anandibai, but also the mercenary soldiers (in a chorus on parade) and their leader who ultimately kills Narayanrao.[51]

The dramatic end to Narayanrao's young life inspired three 'farces', all entitled *Narayanrao Peshwe Yanchya Mrityucha Faars.* One of them (with no bibliographical details) is a 13-scene play that starts with the news of Madhavrao's death and then shows a full durbar at Satara where the Chhatrapati invests young Narayanrao as the new Peshwa.[52] Then follow discussions of military strategy for invading the Nizam during which Narayanrao overrules his uncle Raghoba. The latter smarts under the insult, and is cajoled by his wife Anandibai to seek revenge (in a scene that ends with a kiss). It is ultimately the ambitious and ruthless Anandibai who drags away the young Peshwa pleading piteously with her and hands him over to the mercenaries.

*Zashiche Raniche Natak* (1870, alluded to earlier) by V.M. Nashikakar and others is avowedly based on Chambers' *Indian Revolts.*[53] This prefatory acknowledgement was possibly the authors' tactful safeguard against a charge of sedition: describing 'the brave and praiseworthy deeds' of Rani Lakshmibai just 12 years after the great uprising involved tight-rope walking. The implicit subversion was reinforced

[50] Cited in Banahatti, *Marathi Rangabhumicha Itihas*, p. 200.

[51] The play is included here because of its historical nature, despite its musical format.

[52] The text is reproduced in Kulkarni (ed.), *Marathi Faars*, pp. 234–47.

[53] Patwardhan, 'Natya-vangmaya', pp. 53–55.

by Sutradhar's introduction to the effect that the English, now the sovereign power on earth, are intolerant of other religions and have abolished princely states by just or unjust means, so that God has sadly averted His eyes. However, the mythological style of the play, combined with various digressions, dilutes its impact.

V.R. Katti Mudholkar's *Sawai Madhavravache Natak* (A Play about Sawai Madhavrao, 1871) is a prose play shorn of all mythological influence and presents a practically biographical account of the young Peshwa from his childhood to his early suicide. The uninteresting wealth of events and characters is, however, offset by a dramatic conflict between the young Peshwa and his domineering adviser Nana Phadnis who allegedly kept him under strict surveillance.

Also in 1871 came K.S. Ghate's *Afzalkhanacha Mrityu* (The Death of Afzalkhan), based on Grant Duff's history of the meeting between Shivaji and Afzalkhan – and written largely in Hindustani. Here the Maratha–Mughal enmity acquires wider dimensions of a conflict between good and evil. The theme later inspired the popular *Afzulkhanacha Faars* (A Farce about Afzalkhan, K.M. Thatte, 1886).[54] The illustrated 12-scene play follows Kirtane's standard format: it opens with two Brahmin clerks who eulogise Shivajiraje for his bravery, military exploits, spontaneous generosity, compassion, and warlike stance towards the mighty Mughals. The next scene, at the court of the Mughal Badshah (Aurangzeb), shows discussions involving Birbal, Afzalkhan, Mughal officers, and courtiers. Only Gopinathpant, the Mughal agent in the Deccan, speaks Marathi, resulting in some bilingual scenes. Gopinathpant is co-opted into Shivajiraje's project of establishing a Hindu kingdom in the Deccan, protecting dharma and its symbols – Brahmins and cows. As agreed, Gopinathpant makes a false report to Afzalkhan about the timid Shivaji wishing to meet him alone and unarmed. Meanwhile Shivaji bids (in separate scenes) farewell to his mother Jijabai and his wife, and seeks blessings from his mother, Goddess Bhavani (who presents him a precious sword), and his guru, Ramdas. At the actual meeting Shivaji pretends to embrace Afzalkhan and kills him with his hidden iron claws. The jubilant Gopinathpant is rewarded as promised. The play skilfully recreates Shivaji's character as the hero–king who is also the ideal son and husband, devotee and disciple, by weaving together all the important persons associated in the public mind with his life.

[54] The text is reproduced in Kulkarni (ed.), *Marathi Faars*, pp. 171–91.

N.B. Kanitkar's first play, *Shri Malharrao Maharaj Natak* (A Play about Maharaj Malharrao, 1875), evolved a theme more contemporary than historical – the recent dethroning of Baroda's Malharrao Gaikwad on allegations (later withdrawn) of ordering the death of the British Resident, and his consequent exile. The Maratha prince attracted sympathy from the whole nation, but especially from Maharashtra. The author's introductory verses attribute the prince's fall to his vacillation and reliance on selfish and undeserving officers, thus unfortunately undercutting the reader's sympathy; but the plot is nevertheless gripping because of a series of political intrigues. This play, together with Kanitkar's other ones, located him firmly as a staunch adherent of Tilak's politically militant and socially conservative agenda. This ideology left an extended imprint until Tilak's death in 1920.[55]

Prose plays rarely achieved the popularity of the mythologicals and musicals. All three genres ran simultaneously until the end of the 19th century, though some companies specialised solely in prose plays.

[55] Kale, 'Natya-vangmaya', pp. 124–25.

# 3

# B.P. Kirloskar's Musical Plays (1880)

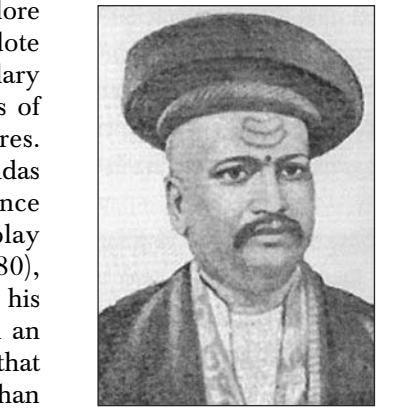

**Plate 3.1:** B.P. Kirloskar, c. 1880.

Much relished in the theatre lore is a possibly apocryphal anecdote about the sole and thus legendary encounter between the creators of the two musical–dramatic genres. Kirloskar had requested Vishnudas Bhave to grace with his presence an early performance of his play (presumably *Shakuntal*, in 1880), and hastened afterwards to seek his response.[1] Vishnudas replied in an ostensibly complimentary vein that he found no fault with it other than that the ticket-clerk was not allotted any songs. If this was rectified, he said, the play would be altogether perfect.[2]

But for the spectators the play was 'altogether perfect' as it was. Vishnudas's abrasive insinuation could not negate Kirloskar's innovation of making the individual characters come alive through dialogue and song – instead of miming Sutradhar's continuous litany – to advance a well-constructed plot. The Kirloskar tradition's popularity and longevity was proof of the significant space it had carved out as a relatively realistic, musically enriching, and socially acceptable

[1] The name is pronounced 'Shaakuntal ' and means that which pertains to Shakuntala.

[2] Cited in Kale, 'Natya-vangmaya', p. 44.

form of entertainment. On one level it bridged the divide between a mythological and a social or family play; on another it 'musicalised' the audiences far more deeply than did any other regional theatre tradition in India. Thus was founded the Kirloskar tradition of 'sangit natak' which was an extraordinarily attractive conflation of cultural continuity (through mythological and historical themes), modernity (through new dramatic conventions), and novelty (through a spectrum of musical styles).

The landmark event elicited, half a century later, the renowned novelist N.S. Phadke's encomium that this cultural 'revolution' had ended the four-decade-long cultural Dark Age and introduced Maharashtra to 'real' theatre.[3] Kirloskar's maiden performance had given discerning spectators 'new eyes and new ears' he added, and had ushered in a 'new era' in theatre.[4] The ultimate marker of Kirloskar's iconic status was his inclusion in the historian V.K. Rajwade's list of the seven most influential Maharashtrians of the post-Peshwai century because this brilliant writer of musical plays had contributed to cultural enrichment and thus to the public good.[5]

The innovation of the sangit natak – quickly entrenched as the best and perennial source of entertainment – was initially difficult to slot. Vishnushastri Chiplunkar called it an 'opera' in the English style.[6] A.V. Kulkarni viewed *Sangit Saubhadra* (1882) as a musical variation of the Vishnudas mode and labelled it a 'musical mythological play'.[7] Literary and drama critic V.D. Kulkarni stressed its affinity with the prose play by calling it 'the first musical bookish play'.[8] All this highlights Kirloskar's dialectical paradigm shift: a successful synthesis of the two existing dramatic modes melding Vishnudas's

[3] N.S. Phadke, *Kirloskar: Vyakti ani Kala*, Pune: Vinas Prakashan, 1964, p. 7.

[4] Cited in Vasant Shantaram Desai, *Balgandharva: Vyakti ani Kala*, Pune: Vinas Prakashan, 1959, p. 6.

[5] V.D. Kulkarni, *Sangit Saubhadra: Ghatana ani Swarup*, Pune; Vinas Prakashan, 1974, p. ix.

[6] Cited in Trimbak Narayan Sathe, 'Upodghaat' in B.P. Kirloskar, *Kai. Anna Kirloskarkrit Sangit Shakuntal Natak*: *Sachitra*, Pune: A.V. Patwardhan, 1930 (1883), p. 14.

[7] Kulkarni, *Marathi Rangabhumi*, p. 107.

[8] Kulkarni, *Sangit Saubhadra*, p. 134.

musicals with the Western conventions of prose drama. East and West thus met unexpectedly in the performative arena of theatre, albeit in a highly Sanskritised form.[9]

Even so, the 'real founder' of the musical play remains a matter of controversy, because Kirloskar's *Shakuntal*, performed at Pune's Anandodbhav Theatre on 31 October 1880, was predated by Sokar Bapuji Trilokekar's mythological *Nala-Damayanti* (published and performed in 1879 in Mumbai) which similarly had prose dialogues and songs. Trilokekar was inspired by the Sanskrit prose-and-song *Shakuntalam*, performed by Elphinstone College students, and wrote *Sangit Harishchandra* (published and performed in Mumbai in 1880, but earlier than Kirloskar's *Shakuntal*) and *Savitri*.[10] Complicating the matter is K.B. Marathe's claim that Kirloskar had pre-empted Trilokekar through a performance of *Shakuntal*'s first few acts at Belgaum in 1875.[11] Marathe's argument and evidence seem unconvincing; additionally, the detailed description by T.N. Sathe of Kirloskar's progress in translating *Shakuntal* at Pune belies Marathe's claim.[12] According to Sathe, in August 1880, Kirloskar and some colleagues, during their stay at Pune, had gone to see *Tara* (Marathi *Cymbeline*), but reached the theatre late and found it full. Their second choice settled on a Parsi company's *Indrasabha* which inspired in Kirloskar the idea – heartily supported by his colleagues – of producing a musical in Marathi. Kirloskar started on his musical translation of Kalidas's *Shakuntalam* at dawn the very next day and shared his progress with a group of friends (who were counted among Pune's literary elite) in the evening; this became a daily practice.

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[9] For a discussion of the reception of Kirloskar's *Shakuntal*, see Urmila Bhirdikar, '"Gani Sakuntal Racito": Annasaheb Kirloskar's Sangit Sakuntal as Marathi Opera' in Saswati Sengupta and Deepika Tandon (eds), *Revisiting Abhijnanasakuntalam: Love, Lineage and Language in Kalidasa's Nataka*, New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2011, pp. 75–110.

[10] Kulkarni, *Marathi Rangabhumi*, pp. 87–89. Kulkarni also claims that Kirloskar took many tunes from Trilokekar's plays. Trilokekar wrote four Marathi and seven Gujarati musicals; Dandekar, *Pauranik Natake*, p. 147.

[11] K.B. Marathe, 'Sangit Shakuntal: Rangabhumivaril Kranti' in *Marathi Rangabhumicha Purvaranga: Kirloskar-purva Marathi Rangabhumicha Magova*, Pune: Shrividya Prakashan, 1979, 169–94.

[12] Sathe, 'Upodghaat'.

This reinforces Trilokekar's claim to the pioneering status ahead of Kirloskar. But the debate is ultimately futile because of Kirloskar's undisputed iconicity as the founder of a new tradition backed by a permanent and touring theatre company.

## B.P. Kirloskar and His 'Sangit Natak'

Balwant Pandurang (alias Annasaheb) Kirloskar (1843–1885) was born in the year of Vishnudas's debut, in the small town of Gurlhosur near Dharwar, near Maharashtra's current border with Karnataka.[13] Here he was educated in Kannada, before coming to Pune. Although unable to finish high school, he received from his father a good knowledge of Sanskrit language and literature. He indulged his early fascination for theatre by writing mythological akhyans for companies in Kolhapur and Sangli, and later by helping to set up the 'Bharat-shastrottejak Mandali' (Company for the promotion of Bharat's [Natya] Shastra) to stage mythologicals. Under family pressure he became a school teacher at Belgaum, then worked in the police department, and finally as a clerk in the Revenue Commission's Deccan Division in Mumbai. The office moved to Pune for the rainy season in 1880 – and the rest is theatre history.

Years earlier Kirloskar had debuted with *Shaankara-digjaya* (Shankaracharya's Conquest of the World, 1874), a life story in a marvel-filled mythological idiom, combining the Vishnudas and Kirtane traditions. The prologue revealed Kirloskar's Brahmanical, Sanskritised, and religious mindset.[14] Then followed his incomplete historical play, *Alla-ud-dinchi Chiturgadavar Swari* (Alla-ud-din's Invasion of Chittor), in Kirtane's style.[15] Together with his later plays, Kirloskar's repertoire thus ran the thematic gamut of all existing genres.

### *Sangit Shakuntal*

Launching *Shakuntal* was Kirloskar's re/invention of tradition by recuperating Kalidas's famous work. His was the fourth translation

[13] This brief life-sketch is based on Kale, 'Natya-vangmaya', pp. 126–27.

[14] Cited in Marathe, 'Shakuntal', pp. 173–74.

[15] Marathe, 'Shakuntal', p. 177.

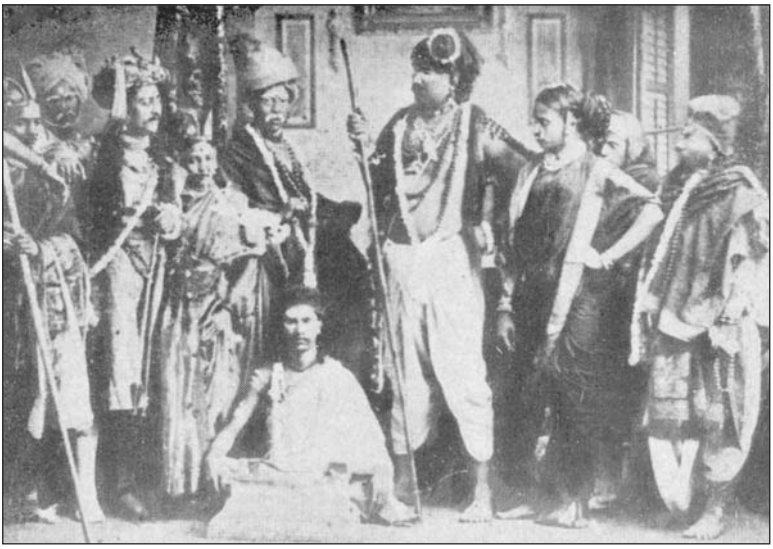

**Plate 3.2:** Scene from *Sangit Shakuntal* with Sharangarav (Kirloskar, centre), Shakuntala (Bhaurao Kolhatkar, right), and Dushyant (Moroba Wagholikar, left), c. 1882.

of the text from the 'divine language' to that of the mortals in western India.[16] Its distinctive feature was the punctuation of a meticulous prose translation by songs in various ragas for the original verses.[17] Given the contemporary Sanskritised Brahmin mindset, the play was subjected to a minute scrutiny for the author's grasp of Sanskrit and command over elegant Marathi; its effectiveness on stage was a given. The publisher of its illustrated edition faulted it for 'mistakes in translation', but lauded his Marathi style and introduction of classical music.[18] However, the theatre personality S.B. Mujumdar vouched for the accuracy of the translation and, surprisingly, its greater suitability

[16] The three existing translations were in verse, prose, and a combination of the two. Information about the inception and performances of *Shakuntal* is derived from Sathe, 'Upodghaat'; and Kulkarni, *Marathi Rangabhumi*, pp. 92–113.

[17] Whether the Sanskrit verses were chanted in the appropriate metres or actually sung is not known.

[18] A.V. Patwardhan, 'Prastavana' in Kirloskar, *Sangit Shakuntal*, p. 3.

for the stage vis-à-vis both the original and the other translations.[19] Despite its classical origin, the play did not establish the hegemony of the text but founded a performance-oriented tradition.

*Shakuntal* had thus far been performed only in Sanskrit and in English translation, mostly by college students. After readying a few acts in Pune, Kirloskar held a reading for enthusiastic friends who formed the city's intellectual and cultural elite. Finding actors (especially singer–actors) was a challenge, the profession being still generally discredited. He managed to recruit the requisite talent (including himself), set up 'Kirloskar Natak Mandali', and staged the first four acts in Pune in October 1880 – the obvious assumption being that the storyline was well-known and also subsidiary to the novel staging and music. The first six acts were staged in September 1881, and the whole seven-act play in November 1881.

The initial launch was a significant social and cultural statement greeted with thunderous acclaim. Kirloskar's visible support structure included eminent high court lawyer friends who volunteered as ushers in Mumbai to welcome the spectators, as at a social function. They also signed the handbills of the play as 'managers' to lend prestige to the enterprise; on the company's tours the local leaders signed the handbills. Public leaders such as Mumbai's K.T. Telang and Pune's G.G. Agarkar made congratulatory speeches on stage during an intermission. (Kirloskar reciprocated by fulfilling his social obligations. He donated the proceeds of a performance of *Shakuntal* to a memorial fund for Vishnushastri Chiplunkar who died in 1881, and later gifted the publication rights of his *Shakuntal* and *Saubhadra* to the Aryabhushan Press owned by Tilak and Agarkar.) The company soon toured Nashik, Solapur, Barshi, Belgaum, Hubli, Dharwad, and had the honour to perform at the courts of Baroda and Indore.

The play's greatest appeal was Kirloskar's only real innovation – the insertion of songs for verses in the original. The tunes for the nearly 200 songs range from a variety of ragas to the simple metrical rendering of couplets. The play is divided only into acts but not separate scenes. The action continues in the same setting; sometimes all the characters exit and new ones enter to indicate the start of a new scene.

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[19] S.B. Mujumdar, 'Navya Avrittiche Vishesh' in Kirloskar, *Sangit Shakuntal*, pp. 1–8.

An outline of the prologue will give a fair idea of the musical profusion to follow. It starts with Sutradhar's nandi (in raga Khamaj) invoking Shiva and Ganesh, to be sung behind closed curtains along with two assistants. But during the debut performance, the curtain was mistakenly opened at this time, revealing the singers (dressed in 19th-century formal attire) to stormy applause. It thus became popular to sing the nandi in full view of the audience. Sutradhar then sings another invocation (in Kalangada) and calls out to his wife, Nati (literally, actress). On her asking which play is to be performed that day, he mentions (in Jogi) Kalidas's *Shakuntal*. She responds suitably (in Alaiya-Bilawal). Explaining his choice (in Lilambari), Sutradhar asks her (in Dhumali) to entertain the audience by lauding the current season, Grishma or the beginning of the rainy season. She accedes (in Khamaj). The prologue ends with Sutradhar introducing the play (in Jogi) by pointing to the entry of King Dushyant.

While on a hunt, Dushyant visits the hermitage of the sage Kanva (or Kashyap) and falls in love with his lovely foster daughter Shakuntala (biological daughter of the sage Vishwamitra by the celestial beauty Menaka).[20] Smitten by love at first sight, they enter into a *gaandharva* marriage, without the benefit of religious rites. After Dushyant's departure, while pining for him, Shakuntala is remiss in her hospitality to an irascible sage who curses her that her husband will forget her – but will recognise her on seeing a memento. Kanva returns, is apprised of the developments and prepares to send his daughter to her husband: the farewell scene has been valorised as the peak of Kalidas's poetic and emotional brilliance. A famous Sanskrit saying claims that drama is the most enchanting of all forms of literature, that Kalidas is supreme among all dramatists, *Shakuntal* his best creation, Act IV the most appealing part of the play, and the verses addressed by Kanva to his daughter while saying farewell are the most touching.

Escorted by Sharangarav and other ashramites, the now pregnant Shakuntala reaches the king's palace and, when he fails to recognise her, prepares to show him the ring he has gifted her – only to find that she has lost it while bathing in a river on the way. While the next step is being planned, the distraught Shakuntala is rescued by her celestial mother and carried off to the heavens.

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[20] Kanva was a Brahmin and Vishwamitra a Kshatriya (like Dushyant). This caste angle is significant as it enables Dushyant's marriage to Shakuntala.

Soon a fisherman finds the valuable ring inside a fish; it is conveyed to the king and jogs his memory. The repentant king pines for Shakuntala, but cannot find her. A few years later he finds in a forest hermitage a small intrepid boy playing with a lion cub: the boy resembles him and is discovered to be the son of Shakuntala who enters just then. Dushyant begs her forgiveness, the episode of the curse is explained, and the two are united. The play ends with Dushyant singing the Bharat-vakya. This is followed by Kirloskar's final invocation to Shiva.

*Sangit Saubhadra*

With his second play, Kirloskar repaid his debt to Sanskrit literature: it was translated as *Sanskrita-Saubhadram*.[21] This was an original creation, because dipping again into the vast and famed pool of Sanskrit drama was not an option. So he settled for an 'entirely imaginary' play, although the story of Subhadra's marriage to Arjun was well-known as a 'historical episode' from the puranas. He adhered to as many of the copious rules of Sanskrit drama as possible, and added 'rasas in the English style' (probably implying romantic rather than erotic love).[22] The result was a path-breaking presentation of a popular, charming mythological romance which was essentially a contemporary musical social comedy. On 18 November 1882 Kirloskar presented the first three acts of *Sangit Saubhadra*; the remaining two were added and the whole performed in March 1883. The play was published the same year; its popularity has lasted to date.

This was Kirloskar's real test as a dramatist. Plot construction followed the *Natyashastra* norms of one continuous act; but instructions such as 'Enter Subhadra sleeping, with two dasis standing on one side and Balaram on the other' (for what is now the beginning of Act II, Scene 2), suggest Kirloskar's acceptance of the conventions of the proscenium stage with drop curtains. 'Deep' scenes occupying the whole stage alternated with 'shallow' or 'cover' scenes played out in the front portion (while props were installed for the next deep scene).

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[21] The translator was S.B. Velankar; Kulkarni, *Sangit Saubhadra*, p. 10. 'Saubhadra' means that which pertains to Subhadra.

[22] B.P. Kirloskar, 'Prastavana' in *Sangit Saubhadra Natak*, Pune: H.N. Gokhale, 1907 (1883).

Recruiting more talented singers was difficult; persuading them to impersonate female characters far more so. Besides, tunes had to be selected to suit the individual singer's timbre. Roles had henceforth to be written to suit the available actors, and the presence of characters on stage spaced so as to allow multiple roles for some.

This independent creation involved a series of choices in interweaving diverse elements from the existing incarnations of the popular story, writing lyrics to carry forward the narrative or express moods and emotions with greater economy and felicity than would prose dialogue, matching these lyrics with suitable tunes, and deciding upon their placement.[23] Inspiration was drawn from contemporary Marathi, Parsi, and Kannada theatre, as well as Sanskrit and English performances; but the product was both new and typically Maharashtrian – and successful enough to consolidate the new genre.

Numerous variants of the Subhadra–Arjun story were popular at the time: the four Marathi adaptations of the Adiparva of Vyasa's *Mahabharat*; Vyasa's *Bhagavat* with its three Marathi devotional adaptations; nine Sanskrit plays on the theme; and three akhyans in the kirtan tradition. The likeliest sources for Kirloskar's play were *Subhadra-parinaya* by Shahuraje Bhosale of Tanjore, which influenced the akhyan of the Kannada yakshagan play *Subhadra-kalyan* (which Kirloskar was probably familiar with).[24] One more source, generally overlooked by critics, was M.V. Kelkar's Marathi play *Sangit Subhadra-haran* (1879) which Kirloskar seems to have made ample use of.[25] Out of this material he created a love story with touches of humour, set in a seemingly contemporary extended aristocratic family sharing middle-class values. Its sole objective was to provide recreation, as stipulated by the *Natyashastra*.

Sanskrit dramaturgy has clearly moulded *Saubhadra*, and in turn set certain enduring conventions: the initial nandi followed by the Sutradhar–Nati scene as a prologue, the entry of each important character being heralded in the preceding dialogue, short bridge-scenes, the use of dramatic irony, soliloquies and asides, bi-focal scenes (where two characters or sets of characters converse or soliloquise

[23] Kulkarni, *Sangit Saubhadra*. The present discussion owes a great deal to this work.

[24] The year of this work is not known; Shahuraje reigned from 1684 to 1711; *Ibid.*, pp. 53–56.

[25] Dandekar, *Pauranik Natake*, pp. 195–96.

independently of each other), announcements made in the wings, and the final Bharat-vakya. More pertinent to the modern theatre-goer, it is an unending musical feast.

The prologue (with nine songs) starts with Sutradhar's invocations; the last of these introduces the theme of Shiva winning the hand of his beloved Parvati in marriage. Nati's anxiety about her marriageable daughter is allayed by Sutradhar's assurance about having found a suitable groom in their own Dwaraka. This leads to the local preparations for Subhadra's wedding with the Kaurav king Duryodhan.

The entry of an irate Arjun opens Act I (with 20 songs): while travelling as a pilgrim through a forest he hotly refutes in a monologue the rumour that his beloved Subhadra – promised to him by her brother Krishna himself – is to be married to another. The sage Narad arrives dancing and singing praises of Krishna. He advises the disheartened Arjun, now bent on ending his life, to settle instead for renunciation – of a type that would allow him to revert to a householder, if need be. Arjun's multi-hued feelings here – romantic love, anticipation, disappointment, humiliation caused by a breach of trust, frustration leading to despair – formed a kind of self-expression new to Marathi drama.

An off-stage announcement of Subhadra's sudden disappearance is followed by an equally unexpected entry of a rakshas carrying her and then his disappearance when attacked by Arjun. Awakening from her swoon, Subhadra is astonished at her surroundings. In a partly bifocal scene, Subhadra appeals to the absent Arjun to rescue her, while he watches quietly. She then has a brief conversation with the blood-drenched Arjun (whom she fails to recognise), swoons again, and is carried off by the same rakshas during Arjun's absence to fetch water to revive her. But the rakshas has briefly revealed in a stage whisper – or rather, a roar – his participation in Krishna's plot to save Subhadra from a distasteful marriage. The audience is now complicit in the intrigue, while the two main characters most deeply affected by it, Arjun and Subhadra, remain ignorant of it. This is the point at which dramatic irony begins, to run through the entire play.

In Act II (15 songs) Krishna's opening soliloquy reveals the details of his strategy, devised to avoid open defiance of his older brother Balaram's decision to marry their sister Subhadra to Duryodhan. Krishna now establishes the reputation of the renunciant Arjun as a *yati* or holy man, with help from the family guru Garga Muni and

by Krishna's priestly friend, Vidushak – an ugly man proud of his looks, lazy, gluttonous, and quick-witted. Meanwhile Subhadra's brief disappearance at a vital juncture postpones her wedding to the next auspicious occasion four months away. Privately Subhadra bemoans – in song – the futility of her high birth and her helplessness in the present predicament.

Balaram, predictably impressed by the yati, extols his virtues (in Act III, with 15 songs). Krishna's strong scepticism enrages Balaram and strengthens his resolve to install the yati in Subhadra's apartment to allow her the spiritual benefit of his holy presence. Krishna then visits Rukmini in her bedchamber and coaxes her out of her sulks at his long absence with a very popular, romantic-erotic song ('Do not be angry, O Beauty, Take pity on me'). In response to her pleading on Subhadra's behalf, he shares his intrigue with her in a whisper. Meanwhile Subhadra's spirits are revived in the yati's company (Act IV, eight songs). Rukmini meets the yati alone, exposes and teases him. She also reveals to him (but not to the audience) the next phase in Krishna's plot. Preparations are made for the royal household's excursion to the seashore on the morrow for a festivity.

Emboldened by the certainty of Krishna's support, Arjun walks with Subhadra up a mountain (Act V, 19 songs), while the rest of the family and the citizenry are at the seashore. These two exchange personal information, Arjun reveals himself, and they depart to seek Balaram's blessings. The incensed Balaram is pacified by Garga Muni who endorses the match. Balaram gives Subhadra's hand to Arjun. All the main characters appear on stage in this concluding scene, as demanded by convention (see Plate I). The playwright's choral prayer to Shiva forms the Bharat-vakya.

On the whole *Saubhadra* is a delightful play that keeps the spectators chuckling at the human drama unfolding before them – even though the participants in the drama may be angry or sad – because they are complicit in the intrigue that guarantees a happy ending. The play's strongest attraction is the transformation of a popular mythological story into a contemporary family drama by bringing divine or semi-divine characters into the ambit of an aristocratic family with an essentially middle-class ethos. (The aristocratic angle was highlighted during Kirloskar's time by the characters dressing like members of the princely families in Maharashtra, and affluent touches – like a silver *tulashi-vrindavan* at which Rukmini worships – were added by borrowing expensive items from wealthy local families.) At one

level it is simply the love story of a young girl whose lover absents himself just when she needs him, and whose oldest brother, an incontrovertible authority figure, wishes to marry her to a man of his own choice, rather than hers. Her more approachable but seemingly indifferent middle brother in fact actively unites the lovers. This brother's wife is a friendly well-wisher and occasional companion to her young sister-in-law. The milieu shifts anachronistically from mythology to contemporary society, especially when Balaram, incensed at Krishna's scepticism about the yati's holy credentials, addresses this incarnation of Vishnu as 'you atheist' at the beginning of Act III. The reason this arouses mirth instead of causing shock is precisely that Krishna represents the modern younger generation and a foil to the conventional, god-fearing older brother, as seen in many contemporary families.[26] At another point, Krishna accuses his wife in mock anger of trying to create a rift between the two brothers so that the couple can set up a separate household. These were common concerns the audience identified with. The only socially improbable scenario – in 1882 – was the love affair of a young woman being helped along by her brother; but this was already sanctioned by the mythic story.

The other asset was the play's music. The lyrics are multivalent: they carry forward the narrative (and are usually sung in simple poetic metres), help characterisation through descriptions of both external and internal attributes (Krishna ridiculing the fake yati's fashionable appearance, or Subhadra confiding in her dasi her helplessness and despair), express thoughts or comment on the human condition, or are purely devotional (Narad's praise of Krishna).

*Sangit Shri-Ram-rajya-viyog*

In 1884 Kirloskar started on *Sangit Shri-Ram-rajya-viyog* (Ram's Royal Disinheritance); it was to be his last play and remained incomplete, although the written part (the first three acts of the projected six) was performed on stage.[27]

The story is the well-known *Ramayan* episode where Dasharath's second wife Kaikeyi insists on her own son Bharat being crowned instead of the heir apparent and Kausalya's son, Ram; this is Kaikeyi's

[26] There is also a belief that an incarnation is human like other mortals.

[27] B.P. Kirloskar, *Sangit Shri-Ram-rajya-viyog* in *Kai. Anna Kirloskarkrit Samagra Grantha*, Bhag Pahila, Pune: Gajanan C. Deo, n.d. (1884), pp. 1–96.

demand as a return favour for having saved Dasharath's life. She is egged on by her dasi Manthara who further insists that Ram, after being deprived of his kingdom, be sent into forest exile.

The theme is cleverly introduced in the prologue where Nati is transmuted into Manthara, consumed with jealousy, who poisons Kaikeyi's mind.

Ram himself does not appear at all, although preparations are being made for his coronation. The focus is on Manthara's tantrums, machinations, and consequent incarceration; and the sage Vasishtha eulogising Ram to his disciples. A new but important character introduced into the plot is Shambuk (who usually figures in the latter part of Ram's life) – the son of a dasi – who is raised by his Brahmin father and appropriates the rites and rights of Brahmins. For this transgression of caste norms he is brought in chains by guards to Vasishtha, along with a letter from Ram (the only sign of his absent presence) requesting that he be tried and punished. He manages to rescue Manthara from prison and joins her in plotting revenge on Ram.

In the character of Shambuk and his anti-Brahmin rhetoric, theatre critic K.N. Kale sees a reflection of Kirloskar's awareness and inclusion of Jotiba Phule's protest against 'Brahminocracy' and against Brahmin slavery of the lower castes. Although Shambuk is not sympathetically treated, at least this ideological stream is noted.[28] Manthara similarly introduces feminist inputs – her first song laments the 'social incarceration' of women.

## Kirloskar Sangit Natak Mandali

Kirloskar Company, according to playwright S.K. Kolhatkar, was an ideal which helped to elevate the artistic standards of other companies and earned them a high social status and public good will.[29] 'Kirloskar Sangit Natak Mandali' was set up in 1880 and continued after his death in 1885 with several ups and downs, to remain the premier theatre company. Kirloskar's plays were widely performed by other companies, because he did not charge royalties.[30]

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[28] Kale, 'Natya-vangmaya', p. 46.

[29] Cited in Kale, 'Natya-vangmaya', p. 43.

[30] This generous gesture was allegedly accompanied by Kirloskar's arrogant comment: 'I have planted a pasture; let any donkey graze there'.

Among the numerous difficulties in setting up a musical theatre company, Kirloskar's primary concern was acquiring suitable singer–actors, whereas Vishnudas had needed only one singer. At the time of casting *Shakuntal*, his search had fortunately yielded two professional singers: Moroba Wagholikar/Waghulikar, cast as Dushyant and Balkoba Natekar as Kanva. Kirloskar himself acted as both Sutradhar and Sharangarav (see Plate 3.2). He pressed into service as minor characters some of his highly placed, college-graduate friends and Revenue Department colleagues who were good singers. A high-school student, Shankar Mujumdar, was cast as (the non-singing) Shakuntala. In fact, Shakuntala 'started singing' only in 1882 when a suitable stri-party singer, Bhaurao Kolhatkar, was inducted into the company and when G.B. Deval wrote the lyrics for 'her' on Kirloskar's instructions. In his search for suitable musically-talented boys, Kirloskar had identified, Apparao (Bhaurao's older brother), son of a kirtankar of Baroda; but the father refused to part with his first-born and offered Bhaurao instead, against a compensation of Rs 500.[31] That both Bhaurao and Moroba had, in common with some other actors, the shared background of accompanying a kirtankar, and that Kirloskar himself had written narrative poems for kirtans, testifies to the continuity of the region's public musical tradition.[32]

Bhaurao was the first 'star' of the sangit natak, admired equally for his looks, acting, and singing. In the words of Govindrao Tembe, the famous music director and actor: 'The Creator had gifted Bhaurao with the physique, complexion, facial features, and limbs that were eminently suitable for the roles of upper-caste women and that were capable of creating a complete illusion of a female on stage. A voice could expose the maleness of actors; but he had even received a voice like a woman's'.[33] As the first iconic singer–actor, he received all the adulation showered on a film star today. The lad, known by his nickname 'Bhavadya' soon achieved cult status.[34] Contemporaries, like

[31] Kulkarni, *Marathi Rangabhumi*, pp. 97–98, fn.

[32] The relationship was reciprocal: some kirtankars sang famous songs from Kirloskar's plays during their performances. This was totally legitimate if the topic was Subhadra and Arjun. *Ibid*., pp. 100–01.

[33] Govind S. Tembe, *Jivan-vyasang*, Kolhapur: Govindrao Tembe Smarak Samiti, 1956, p. 6.

[34] Kulkarni, *Marathi Rangabhumi*, p. 99, fn. Actors were usually referred to by such fond nicknames; Ganpatrao for example became Ganya.

'Ahitagni' S.M. Rajwade, proclaimed Bhavadya the non-pareil compared to whom later icons such as Bal Gandharva paled altogether.[35] Bhaurao's voice projection was superb: in the pre-microphone days his songs could be heard a furlong away from the theatre in the stillness of the night.[36] His Subhadra was such a crowd-puller that women could hardly get tickets for his performance; a special show of *Saubhadra* was therefore held for 'respectable women' every time the company visited Mumbai.[37]

Kirloskar was versatile in writing songs and composing tunes suited to the voices of individual actors. After a discord with Natekar in 1884, he rewrote the songs for Kanva (to be played by himself now), composing new lyrics and choosing tunes suited to the timbre of his own voice. Writing songs 'for' individual actors thus became a necessity and a tradition from the inception of the musical play.

Writing lyrics was an integral part of the play, and Kirloskar had mastered the art. Some of the subsequent playwrights added lyrics later (to transform prose plays into musicals) or had them written by others. Kirloskar also set the trend (partly following Vishnudas) of using poetic metres for short descriptive or explanatory lyrics. Tunes for other lyrics were chosen either to suit the gender of the singer, the mood depicted by the lyric, or the diegetic time. The last was necessary because the equation of a raga with a specific time of the day could not be adhered to. Two such felicitous examples are Krishna's songs addressed to Rukmini in *Saubhadra* (Act I, Scene 2): raga Malhar associated with rain for the song 'Clouds have overrun the sky' and the early morning raga Bhupali for 'Look, Beloved, night has passed and dawn appeared'. This also became a tradition faithfully followed by skilled playwrights who were usually also the music directors. Kirloskar's eclecticism was evident from the range of tunes he used, including a couple of Gujarati 'garbas' and a few Kannada

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[35] Shankar Ramchandra ('Ahitagni') Rajwade, *Ahitagni Rajwade Atmavritta*, Pune: Shrividya Prakashan, 1980, pp. 100–01, 109. Varerkar who saw Bhavadya's last performance as Subhadra waxes eloquent about his divine voice and musical training, delicate physique, and acting talent; Varerkar, *Maza Nataki Sansar*, pp. 13–15.

[36] Tembe, *Maza Sangit-vyasang*, p. 35; Dnyaneshwar Nadkarni, *Balgandharva and the Marathi Theatre*, Bombay: Roopak Books, 1988, p. 14.

[37] Sathe, 'Upodghaat', p. xxii.

tunes identified by their first lines (which few in Maharashtra would be familiar with).[38]

In his preface to *Saubhadra*, Kirloskar mentions his preoccupation with the available singing talent while writing the play, borne out by a closer look at the major characters' appearance. Initially the main cast included Kirloskar (as both Sutradhar and Balaram), Moroba (Arjun), Balakoba (as Narad in Act I, Scene 1, and Krishna in later acts), Bhaurao (Subhadra), and Shankarrao (Rukmini).[39] The company had the minimum requisite number of actors, with no understudies. Kirloskar pitched in to play any role he could. The scenes showcasing the four singer–actors were spaced to allow them rest. Music dictated to an extent the structure of the play.

In *Ram-rajya-viyog,* Kirloskar acted as Sutradhar and Dasharath, Moroba as Vasishtha, Balakoba as Vinat and Shambuk, Bhaurao as Manthara, and Bhaskar Bakhale (later the famous singer Bhaskarbuva) as Kaikeyi. Legend has it that the first appearance of Ram and Sita was delayed until after Act III because a suitable pair of young boys for the parts had not yet been found.

Even in later times Kirloskar Company was a miniature world inhabited by people of diverse dispositions who shared their time, accommodation, meals, and occasional pastimes. The routine and lifestyle were much like that of a large Brahmin household. Every evening there were prayers and an aarati sung by boys and minor actors. It was held in a drawing room with a large sitting mattress against one wall; on this stood a picture of Shiva propped up against a bolster. A brass lamp-stand with several burning wicks stood nearby. At other times the room was used for a singing class held for all but the star singers. Famous visitors from the world of music – singers like Gauhar Jan of Calcutta and Alladia Khan, and tabla-player Kanta Prasad, for example – dropped in to listen to singers like Bhaurao, and also performed informally for them.

The home-like atmosphere was underscored by serving good meals, with sweet delicacies on festive days – this figures in all descriptions of the company's management. Only the minor actors and servants had dinner on the evening of the show. The singing stars did not eat, for fear it might affect their voice or induce lethargy. After the show – mostly early in the morning – the entire company had a meal.

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[38] I am indebted to Rajeev Paranjpe for this input about music.

[39] Sathe, 'Upodghaat'.

During Kirloskar's lifetime, his company was a close-knit community, 'with everyone from the proprietor and lead actor to the barber' confident of being an organic part, a member of a 'co-operative society that faithfully served the dramatic art'.[40] This was the first large and permanent 'modern' theatre community – with proper accommodation, regular meals, informal schooling for boy actors, and suitable hospitality for visitors and guests – and a model for all others.

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Musical theatre dominated Maharashtra for half a century. Kirloskar's genius lay in transforming Kalidas's play or sacred myths into contemporary secular drama infused with musical entertainment, enabling instant audience identification instead of the usual distant reverence. The tradition was kept alive by a series of eminent dramatists. Deval, his immediate successor, also relied on the safe option of Sanskrit drama and mythic tales before branching into social themes. Kolhatkar focused on social themes and championed a slew of reforms, but in unrealistic settings and intricate plots that diluted the message. Gadkari's stylistic brilliance overshadowed his reformist ambivalence. The magnetic pull of the musical play drew even a confirmed and ideologically motivated prose dramatist such as Khadilkar who ranged over mythological and social as well as purely imaginary themes. Later dramatists were unable to escape the equation of theatre with musical recreation. Famed singer–actors, such as Bal Gandharva, Dinanath Mangeshkar, and Keshavrao Bhosale gained iconicity, especially through their female impersonations. The hegemonic musical theatre's romantic enchantment distanced from the humdrum daily existence lasted until finally contested by the theatre of social realism – coupled with cinema – in the 1930s.



[40] Cited in Desai, *Balgandharva*, p. 9.

# 4

# New Paradigms of Social Realism (1930s)

**Plate 4.1:** Scene from *Sangit Kulavadhu* with Bhanumati (Jyotsna Bhole) paying respects to her in-laws, c. 1942.

If the echo of Ibsen's Nora slamming the door on her husband had reverberated across Europe in the 1890s, it reached receptive ears in Maharashtra only four decades later.[1] Even the rest of Europe had to make compromises with the Norwegian dramatist's brutally

[1] *A Doll's House* was published in 1879 and first performed in Denmark shortly afterwards; it was performed in English in London in 1889; R. Farquharson Sharp, 'Introduction' in Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll's House and Two Other Plays*, London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1943 (1910), p. ix.

candid dissection of contemporary social mores. Predictably, the impact of his interrogation of patriarchy, reinforced by his compatriot Bjornson, found a diluted expression in Marathi – in a helpless testimony to the impossibility of infusing theatre with a similar level of ideological courage and clarity.

In a path-breaking move, Ibsen's rebellion against the existing forms of drama – farce, melodrama, and the historical costume drama – inspired European theatres to emulate him.[2] The belated Marathi move in that direction attempted to both promote a new dramatic content and form, and resuscitate the flagging theatre, staving off the threat of the 'talkies' after 1932. Cinema as new and inexpensive entertainment shattered theatre's monopoly with an offer of advantages like unfettered action, impressive sets, outdoor locations, trick scenes, close-ups, as well as actresses in female roles and an array of modern social themes. The jaded theatre companies, with ageing male 'stars' impersonating young women in largely escapist scenarios, were unable to withstand the shock.

The fierce competition demanded drastic changes. Drama now shifted its focus definitively to contemporary social themes and its locus to the 'average' family drawing room. Unsurprisingly this 'average' family was upper-caste and middle-class, as well as affluent and Westernised – as signified by the drawing room. The conventional Maharashtrian home, no matter how affluent, was the traditional wada or mansion built on a standard modular pattern around a central courtyard, with physical spaces internally segregated along the axes of ritual purity and gender.[3] Nuclear family life and a drawing room for members of both sexes and all ages to interact and entertain friends were markers of colonial modernity. This was now the privileged site of dramatic action and discussions about social problems and personal dilemmas, borrowed mainly from Scandinavia via England.

Alongside the content was borrowed the new Western format – ideally with three single-scene acts and no music. But the deeply entrenched audience craving for stage music elicited a compromise in the form of the new *bhavgit* (a song portraying emotions) – a short,

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[2] Terry Hodgson, *Modern Drama: From Ibsen to Fugard*, London: B.T. Batsford, 1992, p. 5.

[3] For an account of the residential milieu of the wada, see Kosambi, 'Home as Universe' in *Crossing Thresholds*, pp. 99–126.

succinct, and meaningful poem-like lyric sung without classical elaboration. Less than half a dozen of these were to be insinuated at 'natural' junctures. A music-less prose play was no longer viable.

The revolution was faintly heralded by the short-lived amateur group 'Radio Stars' (composed of some employees of the All India Radio) led by Parshwanath Altekar by introducing the socially relevant prose play, strong in plot and characterisation, with reluctant concession to short musical interludes. The group was soon transformed into a new theatre company – 'Natya Manwantar' (or change of era in theatre) – which exuded consciousness of a paradigm shift and which, nine decades after Vishnudas's foundational event, rotated theatre by 180 degrees to set a paradigm that continues to provide staple theatre fare to date.

## Natya Manwantar

The new initiative in 1933 is described by K. Narayan Kale, an important member, as:

> [A]nother band of youthful lovers of theatre who organized themselves into a limited liability company, . . . with the object of introducing the modern intellectual play of Europe to the Marathi reader and theatre-goer. Theirs was an organized active protest against declamation, against painted cloth curtains that rolled up and down at the end of scenes, against over-emphasis and exaggeration, against the use of songs in the midst of dialogue, against the star-system, against plays written for the benefit of this actor or that, and against the practice of men playing women's roles.[4]

The genius behind the movement was S.V. Vartak whose 'optimism and vigour were the lifeblood of its activities' during the two-year endeavour. Ideological inputs came from the leftist writer Anant Kanekar, Kale himself, and Dr G.Y. Chitnis, and music from Keshavrao Bhole. The actor Keshavrao Date was in charge of production; and Altekar also joined as an actor and associate.[5]

Surprisingly Natya Manwantar sidelined Kanekar's translation of the iconic *A Doll's House* in favour of Vartak's *Andhalyanchi Shala*

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[4] K. Narayan Kale, *Theatre in Maharashtra*, New Delhi: Maharashtra Information Centre, Government of Maharashtra, 1967, p. 10. Keshav Narayan Kale preferred to be known as K. Narayan Kale.

[5] *Ibid.*

(A School for the Blind, 1933), an adaptation of Bjornson's *A Gauntlet* (1883), for its debut.[6] The prioritising of Bjornson over Ibsen was not uncommon in their contemporary Europe, to be reversed some years later.

Bjornstjerne Bjornson dominated Norwegian literature and politics through his poetry, plays, novels, and progressive political interventions. After a dramatic debut in the 1850s with historical themes, he moved on to social themes in the 1870s. While Ibsen analysed social problems, Bjornson is said to also have hinted at solutions. In 1903 Bjornson received the Nobel Prize for literature – three years after it was instituted. His *A Gauntlet*, with its critique of the gender asymmetry inherent in marriage, was considered too controversial and explosive to be performed in Norway, and was staged in Germany – but after a drastic restructuring to achieve a happy end. A translation of this toned-down version was also produced in England in 1894. It was said that hundreds of planned marriages in Norway were broken off as a result of Bjornson's critique of the gendered double standards involved in spouse selection.

*A Gauntlet* presents the dilemma of young Svava, the pretty and highly principled daughter of Mr and Mrs Riis of Christiania (later Oslo). A successful founder of local kindergartens, Svava is just betrothed to the young, handsome, and wealthy Alfred Christensen, an old family friend. He loves her deeply and has supported her with generous donations. The 'perfect' match is opposed only by Dr Nordan, a cynical friend of the Riises (and the dramatist's mouthpiece), who sees all brides as victims. Despite hints at Riis's marital indiscretions, Svava believes her father – and her fiance – to be refined, honest, and clean. Alfred gloats possessively over Svava's purity, but his own comes under scrutiny at the discovery of an earlier love affair with his mother's companion, followed by her hurriedly arranged marriage and early death. A disillusioned and shattered Svava wants to call off her wedding, but her mother advises her to be 'reasonable and forgiving', because a scandal would socially harm her father. Nordan's blunt perspective sees all girls as being conditioned to accept these gendered double standards of morality. Alfred's parents endorse the message, stress that a man is his wife's

[6] Bjornstjerne Bjornson, *A Gauntlet* in *Three Comedies*, Project Gutenberg 7366. Kanekar's translation, *Gharkul*, was produced by K.N. Kale with his own troupe in 1941; Kale, *Theatre in Maharashtra*, p. 17.

master, and advise her to forgive him and trust his promise of future fidelity. Nordan paraphrases this: 'a woman owes a man both her past and her future; a man owes a woman only his future'. An infuriated Svava flings her glove in Alfred's face – throwing down a gauntlet.

The all too common situation is thrashed out in a series of discussions. Alfred is defended by his father: all men of their social circle – including himself and Riis – are the same. Mrs Riis suggests alerting innocent brides in advance to the asymmetrical marital relationship – which, warns Nordan, would abolish the institution of marriage. For Svava, the disclosure of her father's routine infidelity and her mother's social compulsions to stay with him heightens the enormity of the odds against her, making her feel degraded and corrupted. The play ends with her tacit promise to wait for Alfred, hinting at a possible reconciliation.

Vartak's adaptation, *Andhalyanchi Shala* recreates Maharashtra's milieu and ambience, but blunts the edge of its gender-asymmetrical morality.[7] The setting is the drawing room of 'an educated and affluent family' in Mumbai, furnished and decorated in the latest style, with international intellectual symbols like a portrait of Ibsen and a bust of Shaw. Here lives Bimba – a young, pretty, educated founder–director of a successful school for the blind. The play opens on a nervous Sushila (Bimba's mother) trying to silence the latest mistress of Manohar (Bimba's father) by sending her a bribe through Vishwanath (Manohar's younger brother). Ignorant of her father's depravity, Bimba is deeply attached to him and indulgent of his childishness and vanity. Manohar has returned home in response to the news of Bimba's forthcoming marriage to Kumar, exulting that she is to marry the son of a cabinet minister and will be a dinner guest at the Governor's parties. Kumar's brief, romantic conversation with Bimba is followed by a stranger seeking her out with the revelation of Kumar's love affair with his late wife and the birth of her son who resembles Kumar. Kumar's sudden reappearance and unpleasant encounter with the stranger proves the allegations. A shocked Bimba orders Kumar out of the house.

Vishwanath, the playwright's spokesman, argues with Sushila that few men have an untarnished past and even casts aspersions on

[7] S.V. Vartak, *Andhalyanchi Shala*, Mumbai: S.V. Vartak, 1943 (1933).

Sushila for her own probably adulterous thoughts about Annasaheb (Kumar's father) who had once proposed marriage to her but was refused by her family for his lack of wealth. Later Annasaheb himself arrives, to reason with Bimba that if every young woman delved into her fiance's past, 99 per cent of marriages would be cancelled. At the same time, he insists that since men are dominant in society, they have the right to demand a bride with a 'pure' past.

Kumar discloses to Vishwanath the intensity of his first passionate love – for a married woman – which he justifies on grounds of 'love being blind' and the woman's husband being an unsavoury character. Kumar further enlists Vishwanath's (and the audience's) sympathy by claiming that the tragic experience has matured him. In a conversation with Annasaheb, Sushila describes her efforts to raise Bimba in a 'pure atmosphere', in ignorance of Manohar's lax morals and of Sushila's own 'shameful past' – this merely being that three men had loved her, of whom two proposed marriage, though she loved the third who did not propose, namely, Vishwanath.

A repentant Manohar attempts supreme self-sacrifice by deciding to leave home after making a will in favour of his wife and daughter. The ensuing dialogue between Manohar and Sushila reveals the depth of his love for Bimba since her childhood. Bimba arrives (after he has retired to his room), infuriated by Vishwanath's letter exposing Mahohar's debauchery, and demands Sushila's reason for opting to live with him. Sushila discloses her first discovery of his infidelity and leaving home with her infant daughter in pouring rain, to take shelter with Vishwanath. Both mother and daughter catch pneumonia, but recover thanks to Manohar's nursing. His entreaties and seemingly sincere promises have brought Sushila back. Bimba now insists on leaving home with her mother, but Manohar emerges from his room (having overheard them), ready to leave himself. The shock changes Bimba's mind and she refuses to let him go. Later Kumar arrives and tells her that he is unwilling to discuss his past with her, but will not demand to know her past either. The others join them. Vishwanath describes them as blind people groping in the dark. All is forgiven, all ends well.

This slant to the original play reveals a complete inability or unwillingness to grapple with society's basic patriarchal premises. The moral double standards Bjornson critiques are in fact reinforced as Vartak places Manohar's serial indiscretions on par with Sushila's 'possibly

adulterous' thoughts. This idea, though startling, is not new to the Indian psyche.[8] Also, Kumar is exonerated – and even ennobled – by his helplessly passionate love affair because of his subsequent emotional suffering. Bimba never experiences (or seems capable of experiencing) the depth of Svava's anguish – at her fiance's past, her father's low morals, and the collapse of her value system. For her, as for the spectators, the whole experience is but a storm in a teacup, intended to make her, and them, more tolerant of human frailty.

That this claimed to be a radical, thought-provoking drama is a fair commentary on society's blindness to its patriarchal base and a theatre company's compulsion to make compromises. According to drama critic Shubhada Shelke, it is futile to compare this Marathi reincarnation with the Norwegian original, because despite the lure of social realism, Vartak obviously lacked the courage to present *A Gauntlet*'s central social issue, with its logical analysis of the underlying principles, to an audience nurtured on Gadkari's romanticism.[9]

However, the play (first performed on 1 July 1933 at Mumbai's Ripon Theatre) proved radical in other ways. It introduced two actresses to the stage – Jyotsna Bhole (Keshavrao Bhole's wife, as Bimba) and Padmawati Vartak (the playwright's wife, as Sushila). Keshavrao Date appeared as Manohar, Altekar as Annasaheb, and K.N. Kale as Vishwanath. Music was reduced to a couple of songs sung by Bimba mainly at her father's insistence.

Natya Manwantar lasted only two more years: its second play was Vartak's comedy *Lapandav* (Hide-and-Seek) which had a short run, followed by his *Takshashila*, an adaptation of Ibsen's romantic *Warriors of Helgeland* (1858). The 'real' Ibsen eluded the idealistic group which

[8] The entrenched idea of a woman's purity extending even to her thoughts is illustrated by a *Mahabharat* episode. The five Pandav brothers, sitting under a tree, fail to re-attach to a branch a small fruit that has just fallen off, because they have sinned in various ways. Even their common wife Draupadi, assumed to be without sin, fails – her 'sin' being a fleeting wish, on first seeing the handsome Karna (the oldest brother of the Pandavs, abandoned at birth by his then unwed mother), that he were also one of her husbands.

[9] Shubhada Shelke, 'Natak' in *Marathi Vangmayacha Itihas*, Khanda 6, Bhag 1, pp. 389–90.

died out after two years and two further adaptations – *Buva* (from Moliere's *Tartouff*, 1664) and Kanekar's *Usana Navara* (Borrowed Husband, 1934, freely adapted from the American playwright Larry E. Johnson's *Her Step-husband* 1925). The story shows Malati, the heroine, putting up a show of wealth to impress her visiting grandfather by asking a friend of a friend to pretend to be her husband, and forcing her real husband to pose as their cook.[10] Leela Chitnis, Dr Chitnis's wife, was inducted to play the lead in *Usana Navara*, and gradually after some musical training, also the lead roles in the company's first three plays, popularised by Jyotsna Bhole, because about this time Jyotsnabai suddenly left the company.

The ambitious Natya Manwantar failed on many scores – Vartak's insistence on staging his own plays (backed by his financial dominance), ambivalence about the group's supposed objectives, and relative weightage given to professional success and ideology. Contemporary theatre critics were unable to appreciate the innovation or evaluate it by new standards. One objection (within the group and outside) was that instead of introducing the cult figure of Ibsen, it privileged the less influential Bjornson. However, the two Norwegian dramatists converged in their honest social critique – especially women's vulnerability in a male-dominated society with a skewed morality, licentiousness of upper-class men, and a belief

**Plate 4.2:** Leela Chitnis (probably in *Usana Navara*), 1934.

[10] Gazetteers Department, Maharashtra, *Maharashtra State Gazetteers: Language and Literature*, Bombay: Directorate of Government Printing, Stationery and Publications, 1971, p. 179.

in the effects of heredity. (This last was usually revealed through the much-admired 'retrospective method' which builds upon a significant event in the past by exploring its equally significant repercussions on the present.) But a substantial borrowing was the realistic physical setting of the home with its fourth wall removed to allow the audience to witness the action.

## Natya Niketan and M.G. Rangnekar

The much-admired Ibsen finally arrived on the Marathi stage through 'Natya Niketan' (The Home of Drama) founded in 1940 by M.G. Rangnekar (1907–1995). He was a journalist; writer of essays, novels, and bhavgits; recording and radio technician; and small-time film-maker – who found his niche as a playwright, producer, and director with a finger on the theatre-goers' pulse. From 1941 to 1965, he wrote and staged 20 plays to keep the theatre alive, mainly by successfully braiding together contemporary familial concerns, entertaining dialogue and music, and a strong business acumen.[11]

The major theatre companies had closed down by 1935 and most of the leading actors and authors migrated to the film industry, according to Kale. Revival came largely through Natya Niketan, 'the last professional venture worth the name', with Rangnekar approaching theatre with his experience as a journalist and film producer.[12] Success stemmed from his practical sense coupled with dramatic skill – he identified contemporary middle-class social issues, supported traditional values while seeking solutions, and provided emotionalism so crucial for the contemporary theatre-goer. His plays contained a few bhavgits each, sung mostly by Jyotsna Bhole – arguably his greatest asset. She also firmly established the norm of having actresses in women's roles. A realistic family atmosphere and generally playful tone pervaded Rangnekar's creations.

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[11] Mohini Varde, *Mo.Ga. Rangnekaranchi Natyasiddhi*, Mumbai: Lokavangmaya Griha, 1990. Rangnekar's allegedly superior attitude about his success and emphasis on running his theatre company as a profitable business antagonised critics. See for example, D.R. Gomkale, *Rangnekar and Marathi Rangabhumi*, Nagpur: Suvichar Prakashan Mandal, 1950.

[12] Kale, *Theatre in Maharashtra*, p.12.

Natya Niketan's first play, *Ashirvad* (Blessings, 1941), dealt with the problem of young working women compelled to support their natal families. But by far the most famous was his second play, *Kulavadhu* (A Respectable Wife, 1942), assessed variously as a faint echo of *A Doll's House*, or an application of its core idea to local conditions with concern for public taste (also through the inclusion of seven bhavgits).[13]

The play's protagonist Bhanumati (immortalised by Jyotsna Bhole) is a budding film actress who strives to sooth her husband Devadatta's ego by also being an ordinary housewife, especially as he resents her success and sumptuous monthly salary of Rs 1,500 compared to his own paltry Rs 60. Their generally happy and playful relationship is soured by his parents, antagonised by his marrying a girl from a different Brahmin subcaste. But Bhanumati now wants to build bridges and has invited them for a visit, unknown to Devadatta. The conservative parents arrive with their daughter from their Konkan village, full of prejudice against working wives (especially cinema actresses) and a strong preconceived dislike for Bhanumati. She skilfully wins them over, proving her credentials as a dutiful wife, home-maker, and daughter-in-law (Plate 4.1). They visit her film studio and witness the respect she claims with her dignified behaviour. She divulges to them – and the audience – the desperation which led her to embark upon this career during Devadatta's serious illness, loss of job, and their resultant near-starvation. She was compelled to market her only assets – musical training and good looks. Much impressed by her, the in-laws say their farewells with sadness and genuine affection for her.

Meanwhile Devadatta feels neglected within the new family network and jealous of Bhanumati's fame and imminent salary raise. When her film is released and she is lavishly felicitated, he is nowhere in sight but admits later to having watched the function from a corner, not wishing to be identified as the obscure husband of a famous actress. She is shocked by his virulent jealousy and resentment, and by the realisation that a wife glories in her husband's success, but a husband feels hurt at his wife's: he expects her to be dependent and bask in his reflected glory. This absence of real love prompts Bhanumati to

[13] M.G. Rangnekar, *Kulavadhu*, Mumbai: Bombay Book Depot, 1965 (1942).

leave home, watched by a now devastated Devadatta. But her aim is not a search for selfhood and a new viable life for herself, but a stay with her parents-in-law.

A wife's confrontation with marital asymmetry leading to her leaving home are the only commonalities between this play and Ibsen's, and are far outweighed by the divergences – which make Rangnekar's play entertaining and Ibsen's thought-provoking.

Ibsen's Nora comes across as a shallow, childlike and indeed childish woman, flitting about her tastefully furnished home, twittering like a 'little lark' in the words of her successful, pompous, and moralistic husband Torvald Helmer. She is supported by an elderly and ailing friend Dr Rank (victim of an incurable disease resulting from his father's excesses in youth). As the new director of his bank, Torvald agrees to employ Nora's well-qualified woman friend by dismissing Krogstad, an older employee with a murky reputation for corruption. Krogstad now blackmails Nora, threatening to make public the bond against which she had once raised money by forging her father's signature – for the sake of her husband who was seriously ill.

A furious Torvald accuses Nora of having inherited moral corruption, and forbids her to raise their children lest she 'deprave' them as well. Having suddenly lost the security of Torvald's professed love and protection, Nora is shattered by his callous self-centredness. When Krogstad returns Nora's bond and averts a scandal, a relieved Torvald reverts to his earlier indulgent and paternalistic self. But for Nora there is no return after the realisation that both her father and her husband have wronged her, by treating her as a 'doll-child' and 'doll-wife'. The need to please these two men central to her life has stunted her own growth as an individual. She decides to leave Torvald, freeing him from the marriage. He reminds her of her 'sacred duties' as a wife and mother (while his own duty is only to himself, to save his honour); she responds that her most sacred duty is to herself. She needs to 'find' herself and grow as an individual. The hope that the two will mature into better individuals and live together in an equal relationship hangs in the air as Nora shuts the door on her husband, family, and home. (Even European countries were so disturbed by Ibsen's grim scenario that the German version ended with reconciliation and the couple walking hand-in-hand towards a happy future.)

The tenuous similarity between Ibsen's play and Rangnekar's reveals Bhanumati as Nora's timid sister – she only goes from her husband's home to her father-in-law's, exchanging one of her legitimate marital homes for the other. Instead of aiming at self-realisation, she gives up her achievements – independence, career, economic self-reliance. Rangnekar allows a contemporary upper-caste woman who has entered the film industry for a short, successful spell, to protest against the inequality inherent in marriage, but does not endow her with the will or wish to opt out of it. However, even this conventional resolution shocked his audiences and outraged some critics. Some even interpreted it as egoistic Bhanumati shunning her unappreciative husband to seek admiration from her now-doting parents-in-law.[14]

*Kulavadhu*'s popularity did not stop critiques of Rangnekar's theatrical ventures. Some critics charged him with diluting a progressive ideology; others, like playwright V.S. Desai, found ideology per se incongruent with theatre: 'a play is essentially a means of recreation for the spectators' and 'theatre professionals should not pretend to be initiators of a new era'.[15] Desai roundly condemns the new movement by dispelling the 'misunderstanding' that 'novelty meant plays showing characters who wore modern dress and talked about current topics, or plays with single-scene acts, or a new arrangement of lights, or bhavgits, or an absence of a theme or plot, or women playing female roles, or citing Ibsen and Shaw'.[16] For him, novelty had to be slow-paced and only marginally ahead of spectator expectations – as had happened when the night-long plays of the 1880s had been condensed to five hours, or when the social awareness of Deval or the literary skill of Kolhatkar and Gadkari were introduced within the existing structure. Recreation was the essence of the theatre for many like Desai who mentally lingered in the Kirloskar tradition and assumed its continuation.

Quite tepid even in comparison with *Kulavadhu* is Rangnekar's comedy *Kanyadan* (The Sacred Gift of a Daughter in Marriage,

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[14] Gomkale, *Rangnekar*, pp. 34–44. Gomkale's sympathy with Devadatta's actions and critique of Bhanumati illustrate the patriarchal perspective.

[15] Vasant Shantaram Desai, *Makhamalicha Padada*, Pune: Vinas Book Stall, 1961 (1947), pp. 113–16.

[16] *Ibid.*

1943).[17] An elderly couple has two married daughters: the younger Manik lives with them along with her husband who has agreed to this (socially disapproved) arrangement and been rewarded with a lavish lifestyle and an opportunity to study law. But after two years of this constricted existence and forced idleness, he insists on leaving to make an independent life for himself. Manik refuses to 'abandon' her parents, but ultimately consents to accompany him. Just then, the older daughter Ahilya returns to her parents, having left her currently unemployed husband – whom she had married after an elopement. Then follows a series of repetitive discussions about the need for a self-respecting man to support his wife, the propriety of a wife working to support her husband, and the exact meaning of spousal equality. Finally the two young couples live happily and independently, with the now lonely parents visiting them. (Rangnekar acknowledges in a brief prefatory statement that the third and last act shows an unconscious reflection of Bjornson's *A Newly Married Couple*, 1865.)

*Vahini* (Older Brother's Wife, 1945) projects another aspect of the middle-class family in transition.[18] Rambhau is the oldest of three brothers and head of a family of affluent moneylenders, living on the semi-rural fringe of a city. He and his wife Janaki – 'Vahini' to the rest of the family – set the tone of conventional morality that is followed by his younger brother Digambar and his wife Prabhavati. The play opens on a note of expectancy radiating from Janaki eagerly preparing for a long-awaited visit of her youngest brother-in-law Vallabh who has been studying in Mumbai. Prabhavati hints at the possibility of his changed personality during a two-year stay in Mumbai's permissive milieu offering temptations like smoking, drinking, and worse. It later transpires that she has heard rumours to this effect during a recent visit to Pune.

Vallabh's arrival stirs up an immediate storm. It is confirmed that he has had a romantic involvement with a girl in his college which

[17] M.G. Rangnekar, *Kanyadan*, Mumbai: M.G. Rangnekar, 1943. The inaugural performance in 1943 had Saraswati Mane as Manik and Krishnarao Chonkar as Bhargav.

[18] M.G. Rangnekar, *Vahini*, Mumbai: Bapat ani Kampani, undated (1945). The play was first performed in 1945. The only member of the cast whose name is now familiar was the writer P.L. Deshpande who enjoyed a brief spell as a singer–actor, in the role of Vallabh.

has resulted in her pregnancy and he has rushed home to apprise his family of his intention to marry her immediately. Hot on his heels arrives the girl's father, the impoverished Vishnupant (harassed by the need to marry off his six daughters) to put pressure on Vallabh. Simultaneously appears Shankarbhau, an old and wealthy family friend, one of whose six daughters is as good as promised to Vallabh. Considerations of lineage intervene – the reputation of Vallabh's family must be saved at all cost. As a compromise, Shankarbhau pays Vishnupant handsomely to arrange his daughter's abortion. When these family pressures seem to overwhelm Vallabh, Janaki spurs him on to do the right thing – rush to Mumbai and marry the girl. All the men undergo a sudden change of heart and decide to go to Mumbai in a group to bring home the bride-to-be with due pomp and ceremony. Vallabh sings – literally – the praises of his Vahini who has always nurtured and supported him like a mother.

## Social Critique with Humour: P.K. Atre

Like a breath of fresh air came the unique contribution of Pralhad Keshav Atre (1898–1969) which introduced humour, both as the mainstay of drama and as a conspicuous tempering of solemnity. His predilection for parody to expose human follies and foibles extended iconoclastically to even well-known persons or literary works.[19] His main contribution was to introduce the drawing-room comedy to Marathi audiences in a one-man 'movement'. Some claim that he propped up the Marathi stage in the sagging 1930s and 40s.

Atre grew up in Saswad near Pune, lived in Mumbai but mostly in Pune, and studied in England for a year. After starting as an educationist, he joined the Congress party and served as a municipal councillor. His prolific literary output included 11 plays (three of them serious), poetry, and an autobiography. Later he founded the film company 'Navayug' and wrote screenplays.[20] In his autobiography he explains how he became successively a poet, parodist, humorist,

[19] In *Sashtang Namaskar*, he parodies a sad poem by his literary guru R.G. Gadkari; Pralhad Keshav Atre, *Sashtang Namaskar*, Mumbai: Parachure Prakashan Mandir, 2001 (1933).

[20] D.R. Gomkale, *Atre ani Marathi Rangabhumi*, Pune: Vinas Prakashan, 1962.

teacher, dramatist, orator, journalist, and socialist. He also claims to have had 'a more diverse, extraordinary, and wide experience of life' than any of his contemporaries, and that he became a writer not by just reading literature, but by living life to the full.[21]

With humour as his forte, Atre boasted about being the only writer of his time in Maharashtra to 'propagate laughter on such a large scale'.[22] His debut play was *Sashtang Namaskar*, first performed by Balmohan Mandali at Pune's Vijayanand Theatre in 1933.[23] The title alludes to the customary gesture of extreme respect by prostrating oneself before a deity or a highly revered person. In this case, it also obliquely refers to a form of physical exercise called 'surya namaskar' which is regarded by the elderly Rao Bahadur in the play as a panacea for all ills. His eccentricities are matched by the whimsical behaviour of his four children – as of the other characters. His oldest son Siddheshwar (in his late 20s) is obsessed with astrology and numerology, his college-going daughter Shobhana with composing poems and the marginally younger Meera with writing short stories, while the youngest son Chandu is a naughty schoolboy. Shobhana is enamoured of the budding poet Bhadrayu, but finally settles for the masculine and aggressive, meat-eating Shantanu who dresses like a hunter and carries a gun – after 'taming' him. Bhadrayu then shifts his affections to Meera. Meanwhile other existing equations change with the entry of Tripuri, Shobhana's childhood friend and now an aspiring actress, and her producer–director Mallinath. Meera elopes with Mallinath who is exposed as a fraud; she is rescued in time and he is forgiven by Rao Bahadur when he prostrates himself in remorse. Tripuri promises to marry Siddheshwar.

In his foreword to the 11th edition, Vasant Kanetkar (a highly successful and popular playwright of the next generation) calls this work Atre's first 'experimental professional' play which revolutionised the theatre far more effectively than did Natya Manwantar. Kanetkar valorises Atre's 'dramatic' and witty dialogue, avowedly inspired by Noel Coward, and claims that it contained the seeds of a theatre movement. But it is doubtful whether any of his plays have stood the test of time, despite Kanetkar's assurance to the contrary.

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[21] Atre, *Mi Kasa Zalo?* pp. 80–81.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 81.

[23] Atre, *Sashtang Namaskar.*

Another light drawing-room comedy that keeps the audience chuckling throughout – provided it is a Mumbai audience – is Atre's *Paracha Kavala* (broadly, A Mountain out of a Molehill, 1938).[24] Mumbai is the locus of action and there are unending allusions to the city's various lifestyles and to localities in and around the city. The protagonist is Kalyan (also the name of a town near Mumbai), with colleagues (named after the city's suburban localities) who turn out to be false friends. The thin plot revolves around Kalyan who has just passed his solicitor's examination and is eager to marry his girl friend Vasanti, with a subplot including his friend Kaushik who plans to elope with Kanta and hides her temporarily in Kalyan's apartment. Kalyan's colleagues invite themselves there to a drink party, discover the hidden girl, and then proceed to malign him as a drunkard and womaniser, to the extent of telling lies and forging letters in his name (to get him dismissed from his job), although their motivation remains unclear. Their silly behaviour matches Kanta's fickleness and creates a seemingly impossible muddle which is suddenly resolved at the end of the three-act play (with seven songs, sung mostly by Vasanti).

By far the most popular of Atre's plays, still performed occasionally, is *Lagnachi Bedi* (The Shackles of Marriage, 1936), which celebrated its 75th anniversary in 2011 with fanfare.[25] It is a play with a 'message' which reveals that Atre's apparently innocent and light humour is undergirded by a firm patriarchal perspective.

The compact action unfolds over two days and all the characters are introduced at the outset on the first wedding anniversary of the happy couple, Dr Kanchan and Yamini. The friends who gather to congratulate them are young Parag and Aruna (a live-in couple in a 'friendship marriage'); the much married and widowed Gokarna and his fifth wife, the allegedly shrewish Gargi; Timir who has remained single even after losing his beloved Yamini to Kanchan; and the bachelor Avadhoot who cannot find a wife. Into these celebrations walks Rashmi, a film actress who chain-smokes, carries a lapdog, and effortlessly enslaves every man in sight. It transpires that both Kanchan and Parag have just met her, separately, on the train from Mumbai to Pune and hope to win her. After all five men have made

[24] Pralhad Keshav Atre, *Paracha Kavala*, Pune: Y.K. Atre, 1938.

[25] Pralhad Keshav Atre, *Lagnachi Bedi*, Mumbai: Parachure Prakashan Mandir, 1989 (1936).

fools of themselves over her, she reveals her total indifference to them: she cannot respect any man, because they all succumb to her. But meanwhile she has, through flirtations that camouflage sincerity, brought together Kanchan and Yamini, arranged a wedding for Aruna and Parag, and made peace between Gokarna and Gargi (who promises him all the freedom he wants). Rashmi's concluding advice is: 'Temptation and desire have no end. There can't be a happy family life unless men's uncontrolled behaviour is restrained by the shackles of marriage'. Also, to ensure fidelity from the 'shackled' husband, the wife must retain her physical attractiveness and look after her husband. Rashmi's role as Atre's mouthpiece is underscored by his expressing the same sentiment in the short preface to the play.

But there was a serious – albeit consistently patriarchal – side to Atre, articulated in three plays which lean towards tragedy. Of these, *Gharabaher* (Out of the House, 1934) unflinchingly analyses the multiple oppressions of women, only to reach a quintessential conservative resolution reflecting a high degree of ideological ambivalence.[26] The play is remarkable for many reasons: it dashes the expectations of humour raised by Atre's first play and other writings; it exposes the moral depravity and hypocrisy of public men regarded as 'pillars of society'; and it sketches an eloquent and anguished picture of a woman's daily oppression by men within her marital home and outside. Unfortunately it concludes with the inevitable need for women to compromise – and to continue to suffer.

The first act is as dominated by the elderly, aristocratic Abasaheb Inamdar as is his family – older son Shaunak married to Nirmala, and younger son Nilakanth, Shaunak's half-brother. Abasaheb has been widowed four times and has now postponed his fifth marriage until he finds a wife for Nilakanth and, more importantly, 'tames' Nirmala whom he suspects of infidelity with her brotherly male friend, Padmanabh. At the outset, Abasaheb's wrath is ignited by a lowly acquaintance who tries to ingratiate himself by producing 'proof' of Nirmala's infidelity – a set of love-letters in her handwriting, found in the room Padmanabh rents from this man. Abasaheb orders them to be burnt and decides to throw Nirmala out of his house. Padmanabh happens to visit the family and explains the letters as part of a manuscript novel by Nirmala which he was reading and

[26] Pralhad Keshav Atre, *Gharabaher*, Mumbai: Navabharat Prakashan Sanstha, 1963 (1934).

which was stolen from his room, but is given no hearing. Nilakanth is seen to be a sly young man. Shaunak, sports-loving but otherwise idle, lives off ancestral wealth, spends his time at hic club, and takes Nirmala for granted as a dutiful wife and loving mother to their little son Ashok. Abasaheb summons Nirmala, indicts her for her 'crime', and threatens her with eviction. After making brave and impassioned speeches about preferring to escape the (unspecified) 'agonies of hell' she has suffered in this house, Nirmala walks out of the house, ignoring Shaunak's weak pleas and Ashok's wailing – and signifies the end of her marriage by breaking off her *mangalsutra* (the string of black beads tied by the husband around his bride's neck during the wedding) in an act which shocked the spectators.

Nirmala is next discovered to be a guest in the house of Bhayyasaheb, a successful and wealthy lawyer who holds positions of power in various local institutions, including the municipality. Nirmala owes this shelter to Minakshi who has saved her from attempted suicide. Minakshi, a young widow, is a teacher in a municipal school thanks to Bhayyasaheb who provides her the indispensable male support and protection in return for sexual favours. He makes overtures to Nirmala as well, though without success. In the final act, a contrite Shaunak abjectly begs Nirmala to return home – absence has made his heart grow fonder and revealed the vacuum she has left behind. Nirmala refuses to return to Abasaheb's house, revealing that the torment she had alluded to earlier was the attempted assault on her virtue by both him and Nilakanth – from which Shaunak had failed to protect her by refusing to understand the problem. But now Shaunak fetches little Ashok who has been ill since his mother 'abandoned' him, and Nirmala's heart melts at once. Shaunak has now mentally freed himself from the 'slavery' of his father and promises to set up a new household for just the three of them; Minakshi decides to join them. Both women are (hopefully) freed from male coercion.

In his preface to the first edition, Atre claims that being a work of art, the play does not supply a 'moral'. It only portrays a young man debilitated by his harsh, disciplinarian father and unable to protect his young, well-behaved wife from the attempted sexual persecution by his father and brother; as well as the helplessness of any young woman who tries to lead an independent life in a society of male predators. Even while disclaiming the need for a 'moral', Atre sends a strong message in his preface to the play with his maxim: 'A woman

is a wife for only a moment, but a mother for eternity'. A woman can disregard her wifely duties but not her maternal duties, and further, in a relationship of love, a woman can be free only by willingly accepting the 'slavery' of her loved ones. (This could be Nora's husband propounding her 'sacred duties'.) The conclusion, while reiterating the intrinsically subordinate and 'enslaved' status of women, provides an anti-climax to the earlier dialogues sketching in impassioned words the suffocating oppressiveness of the average woman's life.

The three-act play, with a disarmingly confessed concession to the demand for songs, enjoyed great popularity, according to Atre's preface. It was performed by Balmohan Natak Mandali (which relied on female impersonators) at Pune's Vijayanand Theatre in 1934 and then at Mumbai's Royal Opera House in 1935 where it was watched on 15 consecutive Sunday afternoons by crowded audiences including non-Marathi-speakers. Atre gives credit to the male actor Bapurao Mane who so effectively portrayed the tragic life of Nirmala. A performance was recorded live and broadcast on All India Radio; Gujarati, Hindi, and Kannada translations appeared by 1936, and an English one was in the making. That the play had enjoyed a long run for the next 12 years when the second edition was published in 1946 demonstrates how well its ideology resonated with society at large.

*Udyacha Sansar* (The Family of Tomorrow, 1936), Atre's second serious play, claims to be a realistic portrayal of a transitional society where sins of the father are visited upon the children, with echoes of Ibsen's *Ghosts* and Eugene Brieux's *Maternity*.[27] In the preface Atre mentions that like Ibsen he believes in posing questions, leaving others to find answers; but his debt to the Norwegian in this 'independent' play goes far deeper.[28] Deploying Ibsen's famed 'retrospective method', Atre unfolds the momentous past of a couple which has caused the unhappy present and is about to end in imminent tragedy.

The play opens with Karuna, a housewife and mother trying to support and protect her son Shekhar and daughter Shaila, while her husband Vishram, a successful lawyer, is hardly at home and

[27] Gomkale, *Atre ani Marathi Rangabhumi*, pp. 267–78.

[28] Pralhad Keshav Atre, *Udyacha Sansar*, Mumbai: Navbharat Prakashan Sanstha, 1958 (1936). The play has songs, but also the 'modern' touch of three one-scene acts.

hardly sober. It transpires, mainly through her conversations with the family friend Dr Gautam, that her father, a prosperous self-made lawyer, had married her to the poor but promising student Vishram and lavished warmth and wealth on him. After the birth of Karuna's second child, her father had sent Vishram to England for higher studies, where the young man quickly forgot his family and set up a relationship with a French woman. After some years Vishram was compelled to return home by his father-in-law's ultimatum; his mistress followed him but was bought off by the father-in-law who died shortly afterwards. Now unhindered, Vishram began to seek out other women, one of whom gave birth to a daughter, Nayana. This girl lost her mother in childhood and knew her father only from a photo.

In the diegetic present, Karuna's man-hating graduate daughter Shaila has just fallen in love with Ulhas and consummated the relationship during a brief holiday. Ulhas repudiates the pregnant Shaila because he is already married; Shaila refuses to abort the child. When his wife suddenly dies, Ulhas agrees to marry Shaila; but she spurns him, deciding to live as an unwed mother. In this, Karuna supports her. Meanwhile Shekhar falls in love with Nayana, and when they accidentally discover her true identity as his step-sister, he takes to drink to drown his sorrow and face a 'living death'. Karuna finds the courage to sustain her two children for whom she has stayed in a loveless and humiliating marriage all these years. But the last straw comes with the revelation that Vishram has mortgaged their house which is now to be attached. Karuna's struggles and sacrifices to hold the family together have failed and she jumps to her death from the upper storey of the house (off-stage). Both Shekhar and the now-repentant Vishram lament her death, but a friend sees this as the inevitable result of men shirking their family responsibilities. This is to be the family of the future.

But the tragic fallout of men's irresponsibility hurts women most deeply – in this family and in others. When Karuna weeps, it is not for herself or her daughter, but for all womankind.

The most startling discovery, given Atre's pervasive humorous style, is his sensitive and empathetic account of women's many-sided oppression. That the plots of his serious plays were avowedly sourced as lived experiences recounted by others, with their grimness and anguish modified for the stage, does not reduce their impact or his

courage in making the attempt.[29] These serious plays far outweigh the products of the self-consciously 'new' theatre movement in laying bare the ugliest side of patriarchy. But it is Atre's resolution to the women's dilemma that disappoints. *Gharabaher* ends with a false vision of a soft and humane patriarchal home in which Nirmala will have a life of love and honour, albeit as a 'slave' to her husband and son. *Udyacha Sansar* is pessimistic – or realistic – enough to admit that for a not-so-rare woman in Karuna's position there is no escape but suicide. Sadly, after exposing the brutal social structure, Atre chooses to leave it intact, without attempting even a verbal dent. That this conservatism is understood by some critics as a reassuring sign of his rootedness in local society despite the foreign influences which shaped his art is the strongest revelation of his contemporary mindset.[30]

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On the whole the theatre of social realism contested the hegemony of romantic–musical escapism, and had an abiding impact – albeit greatly diluted in comparison with Ibsen and other Western models. Since the 1930s, there has been no further paradigm shift in Marathi theatre despite a few successful innovative attempts in terms of theme and staging.

[29] In the prefaces to his plays and in his autobiography, Atre claims that practically all his plays are based on real-life characters and that in his serious plays he had to tone down the tragedy because truth was far stranger and more harrowing than fiction.

[30] See for example, Gomkale, *Atre ani Marathi Rangabhumi*, pp. 74, 85.

# Section II
## Plays and Playwrights

**Plate 5.1:** Govind Ballal Deval, c. 1915.

**Plate 5.2:** Shripad Krishna Kolhatkar, c. 1920.

**Plate 5.3:** Ram Ganesh Gadkari, c. 1917.

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# 5

# The Kirloskar Trio

## Deval, Kolhatkar, Gadkari



The centre-staging of playwrights and fidelity to the written word – markers of the Kirloskar tradition – did not always privilege the text over performance. But it enhanced the status of playwrights such that after Kirloskar's sudden death, the company had a playwright either in residence or informally contracted, to ensure a steady supply of play-scripts. Of these the eminent Kirloskar trio – Deval, Kolhatkar, and Gadkari – had a varied impact. One or two of Deval's plays may still be performed, though rarely.[1] Kolhatkar bestowed the name 'Kolhatkar era' on the drama of 1890–1920 and boasted of a chain of 'disciples' such as Gadkari and Varerkar;[2] but is now obscured. Gadkari is treated as a classical dramatist, read but rarely performed. Deval and Kolhatkar headed the line of playwrights with college degrees; Gadkari who lacked this distinction is unanimously held to have outshone all others in stylistic brilliance.

In post-Kirloskar drama, mythological characters gradually yielded ground to ordinary mortals. But underneath the diversity of themes, a new 'formula' evolved: the plot was inhabited by a 'hero' and 'heroine', and stock characters which were 'good', 'bad', 'hypocritical', and 'comic'. In the usually happy ending the 'good' characters triumphed and the 'bad' ones either met their just deserts or underwent a welcome change of heart. Subtlety of characterisation with inner conflict was uncommon. At times a certain social-reformist or didactic element was inserted, with varying emphasis.

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[1] These are *Sharada* and *Samshaya-kallol*, both in an abbreviated form.

[2] V.S. Khandekar, 'Prastavik' in Shripad Krishna Kolhatkar, *Atma-vritta*, R.P. Kanitkar (ed.), Pune: Modern Book Depot, 1971 (1935), pp. 7–21.

All this was brought alive by the actual, attractive performance – with its plethora of songs – which we cannot recuperate today. The privileging of music required the playwright to write the lyrics and also set them to classical tunes. These popular plays – except Gadkari's – were mostly performative rather than literary scripts.

## Govind Ballal Deval

Both as playwright and part-proprietor of the Kirloskar Company, G.B. Deval (1854–1916) succeeded Kirloskar – his school teacher in Belgaum and later his drama guru.[3] After a spell of teaching, Deval graduated from the Agricultural College at Pune in 1884, but did not pursue a related career. He turned to writing and founded–edited a literary magazine for a few years. In 1886 he submitted his play *Durga* (adapted from the English *Isabella*) for the annual competition at Kolhapur's Rajaram College; it received a special mention, but the prize went to Khare-shastri's original, historical play. Kirloskar allegedly prophesied, after a dispute, that success would elude Deval while he (Kirloskar) lived. Indeed Deval came into his own only after Kirloskar's early death and became the company's playwright-in-residence.

Of Deval's seven plays, three were adapted from Sanskrit works – *Mrichchha-katik* (by Shudrak), *Vikramorvashiya* (by Kalidas), and *Sangit Shapa-sambhram* (from Bana's long story *Kadambari*) – and three from English works: *Durga* (from *Isabella*), *Zunzarrao* (from *Othello*) and *Falgunrao* (from *All in the Wrong*, as described below). His seventh and original play, *Sharada*, was undoubtedly his most important.

In *Mrichchha-katik* (The Clay Cart, 1886) Deval's reverence for the original classic is evinced by his careful listing of and justification for the changes he made.[4] Its core is the romance between Charudatta, a happily married Brahmin merchant reduced to penury by his goodness and generosity, and Vasantasena, a beautiful, accomplished, and wealthy courtesan. Once Charudatta's little son demands a toy gold cart instead of his clay cart. Vasantasena, who is enamoured of Charudatta and has earlier had an unexpected opportunity of

[3] The biographical sketch of Deval is based on Kale, 'Natya-vangmaya', pp. 127–29.

[4] Govind Ballal Deval, *Sangit Mrichchha-katik*, Mumbai: Nirnaya-sagar Press, 1906 (1886).

spending a night in his house, gives her ornaments to a servant to make the gold toy.

The villain of the piece is Shakar – a pompous fool, but powerful as the king's brother-in-law – who lusts after Vasantasena. Infuriated by her repeated repulsion, he murders her and implicates the hapless Charudatta. A subplot includes a talented young man, temporarily reduced to thieving, in love with one of Vasantasena's dasis whom he redeems from servitude. Ultimately Vasantasena is discovered to be alive and is rushed to the gallows to save Charudatta from being hanged and his wife from self-immolation. The happy family reunion is witnessed from afar by the courtesan as an eternal outsider – an ending that resonated well with Deval's contemporary conventional morality.

By common consensus Deval's only original play, *Sangit Sharada* (1899), is his best, besides being the first real social play in Marathi.[5] The theme of a young girl coerced by her father into marriage with an old man was suggested by several real-life incidents; it was also a live issue in the social reform discourse. Its realistic characters and dialogue, as well as 79 apt and lyrical songs, added to its appeal.

Starting with the conventional nandi to Shiva, the play pays homage to Kirloskar. Then Nati airs to Sutradhar her indignation over a recent marriage of an old moneylender to a 10-year-old girl, and vows to deal adequately with such elderly grooms. On cue enters the old and wealthy Bhujanganath ('bhujang' or serpent suggests the man's villainy), chased by boys off-stage with taunts about his eagerness to re-enter family life at an age when he should renounce it. He protests his youth and is excited by matchmaker Bhadreshwar Dixit's promise to find him a young and pretty bride. Their exit is followed by Kodanda and Hiranya-garbha, young disciples of Shankaracharya, who condemn lecherous men and 'unequal marriages which lead to untimely widowhood, immoral behaviour, abortion and infanticide, lustreless and weak progeny, and other such great disasters'. Kodanda declares his intention of remaining single until he has wrought positive social change. Bhadreshwar re-enters to induce Kodanda to join Bhujanganath's retinue on a pilgrimage, under a false identity. Later Kodanda happens to overhear a conversation among

[5] Govind Ballal Deval, *Sangit Sharada Natak*, Sangli: R.G. Deval, 1920 (1899).

young Sharada and her friends: her greedy father Kanchanbhat (the word 'kanchan', or gold, suggests avarice) plans to marry her to a rich old man. Unusually, the old man's appearance is described in unflattering terms by Sharada's friends: other playwrights used only women's ugliness as a source of humour. Moved by Sharada's plight, Kodanda promises help.

While Sharada muses nostalgically over her lost childhood, a friend arrives to announce that her married younger sister has delivered 'a mute son' – a euphemism for the onset of puberty. Sharada is beset by anxiety lest she herself reach puberty before being married – an eventuality heavily condemned among Brahmins. She confides this anxiety to her mother Indirabai who comforts her, concealing her own unease. Just then Kanchanbhat triumphantly announces his discovery of a wealthy groom for Sharada, who is even willing to pay a bride-price; and evades Indirabai's questions about his age. Bhadreshwar then arrives with a friend, to 'see' Sharada on behalf of his patron, approves of her, and seals the engagement. Kanchanbhat is suitably impressed by the wealth and generosity of the chosen bride-groom. When Kodanda threatens to expose the hoax, Bhadreshwar has him detained in a dark chamber.

Sharada is now teased by her friends (in song) about her prospective husband who is 'not so old – barely 75 years of age'. The terrified girl is faced with this 'fear incarnate' (as she describes in a famous song), when he prevails upon Bhadreshwar to let him see Sharada alone, contrary to custom. During this brief meeting, Sharada repulses the advances of the man old enough to be her grandfather. Incensed, he complains to her father who drags her home angrily, beating her. As a protest, Sharada starves herself and is sarcastically blunt about her father's treating her as a commodity to be sold to ease his poverty.

But while the wedding is being rushed through, Kodanda – having escaped – enters with the town Kotwal to stop the ceremony because the bride and groom belong to the same *gotra*; such marriages were illegal according to Hindu law at the time.[6]

Kanchanbhat loses his mind as a result of public censure and ridicule. Indirabai's energies are divided between him and a

[6] This clause was subsequently removed from Hindu Law, but is treated as valid by the 'khap' panchayats of Northern India, as shown by recent incidents.

disconsolate Sharada who, the *shastri*s of the town insist, is a married woman (despite the incomplete wedding ceremony). Kodanda brings a written declaration from Shankaracharya that Sharada's wedding is invalid, but her woes are not over – she has just reached puberty, though still unmarried. Unable to endure this dual stigma, she attempts suicide by jumping into the river, but is prevented by Kodanda. She now expects him to marry her, and he gives in to her renewed threat of suicide, breaking his vow of celibacy. The final scene shows Shankaracharya blessing the newlyweds, and Bhujanganath on his way to Kashi as a sannyasi. The curtain closes on Kodanda's Bharat-vakya about the undesirability of unequal marriages and fathers selling their young daughters to old men, followed by a short prayer.

No other play, according to actor Bodas, created such a social upheaval until 1937.[7] This powerful indictment of marriages between partners unequal in age touched an issue highlighted during the Age of Consent controversy of 1891.[8] The only snag is that Sharada's wedding is stopped and annulled for a religio-legal technicality rather than as a moral or social reform issue. Some have also objected to Kodanda's suddenly breaking his vow of celibacy and thus losing audience sympathy.[9]

But such social issues are ultimately dated. Thus Deval's *Sangit Samshaya-kallol* (Waves of Suspicion, 1916) turned out to be his best loved and remembered play, an evergreen comedy still performed on occasion. Here romance and humour envelop the very human flaw of suspiciousness and jealousy – contained at the level of small misunderstandings – aided by memorable songs.

The play's long and international ancestry traces its origins to Moliere's *Sganarelle*, mediated by Murphy's English adaptation *All in the Wrong*, to become the prose *Falgunrao* (1903) at Deval's hands. It was then reincarnated at Gandharva Company's demand for a new musical. Deval acknowledges the ethnic transformation: 'Falgunrao was originally English. But I have taught him our language, dressed him in our clothes, and groomed him in our customs and manners,

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[7] Bodas, *Majhi Bhumika*, p. 63. Bodas does not explain the valence of the year 1937.

[8] For the controversy, see Kosambi, 'Child-Brides and Child-Mothers' in *Crossing Thresholds*, pp. 274–310.

[9] Kulkarni, *Marathi Rangabhumi*, p. 142.

before presenting him to the public'.[10] Ultimately the foreign inspiration has left no trace.

In an imaginary town lives Falgunrao, a prosperous older man at leisure, with his young second wife Krittika; like a typical older and jealous husband he seeks to constrain her movements lest she set up a liaison with a man her own age.[11] In this town also lives Ashwinshet, a young and wealthy merchant. Having been widowed three times in quick succession by his mid-20s, he has decided to enter into an informal but permanent marriage-like arrangement with a suitable, pretty, and educated daughter of a courtesan. Happily he has found Rewati, the perfect young woman who longs to opt out of the family profession and live with a man of her choice. The two exchange vows in a temple.

As a token of love Rewati receives from Ashwinshet his portrait – which she happens to drop as she faints in front of Falgunrao's house during her midday walk home from the temple. He rushes to her aid, and Krittika sees from an upstairs window a young woman in her husband's arms. She hastens downstairs, but the two are gone, with the portrait lying forgotten by the wayside. While she commiserates with the unknown man in the portrait – wantonly deceived by the young woman – Falgunrao walks in and exults at having caught her red-handed, gazing at her paramour's portrait. He succeeds in identifying this person, and confronts Ashwinshet with the portrait, hinting at his supposed affair with Krittika. Mystified, Ashwinshet goes to Rewati's house and, Othello-like, demands to see the portrait. Unable to find it, Rewati tries to make light of the matter, but Ashwinshet is convinced of her infidelity.

Ashwinshet then visits Falgunrao, but finds only Krittika at home. As the two commiserate with each other, Falgunrao enters and Krittika hides Ashwinshet in an inner room. Then Rewati visits Falgunrao and is made to hide in the same inner room when Krittika is about to arrive. Finally, Rewati's mother arrives on the scene, bringing a voice of sanity, and all ends well.

As the string-puller who manoeuvres the other characters, wily Falgunrao is the central figure. He is jealous, affluent but miserly, eager

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[10] Cited by Hari Narayan Apte, 'Prastavana' in Govind Ballal Deval, *Sangit Samshaya-kallol*, Pune: Vinas Prakashan, 1970 (1916), p. 5.

[11] The quaint naming of males after Hindu lunar months and females after asterisms has been rated variously as meaningful or quirky.

to catch putative culprits, but not above joining the general mirth when caught in his foolishness. Krittika is a simple, conventional woman, loud-mouthed but good at heart, and infected by her husband's suspiciousness. Ashwinshet is an educated, wealthy, generous man, but somewhat inconstant in friendship. Rewati is like a breath of fresh air – lively, innocent, witty, refusing to be drawn into a quarrel, but ultimately an unfortunate, temporary victim of an intrigue.

Deval has set the play – like his *Sharada* – in contemporary society which in this case seems quite conventional and untouched by the vigorous ongoing reform discourse. His sole gesture to progressiveness is the easy acceptance of a steady relationship – outside marriage – between an upper caste man and a prostitute's daughter (faintly reminiscent of *Mrichchha-katik*). This is attributed partly to social change during the dozen years between *Falgunrao* and its musical reincarnation, which had rendered the idea acceptable. Besides, such examples did exist: Rewati was modelled on Hirabai Pednekar (Plate 10.2) whom Deval knew well and treated like a daughter.[12]

In a Sanskrit dramaturgical touch, the first song of the nandi suggestively invokes Shiva's blessings, alluding to both his jealousy for the Moon that Parvati gazes at, and her jealousy for Ganga whom he carries on his head. But the Sutradhar–Nati interchange is replaced by a holy man's hortatory song about the ill effects of the 'demon of suspicion' – the same 'theme song' is sung by Rewati to Ashwinshet later and also concludes the play. In addition to other songs, an innovative musical opportunity was later created by inserting a long concert (*jalsa*) into the scene of a religious celebration at Rewati's house. Eminent singers were invited to sing only for this scene, and their names advertised in advance as an added attraction.

## Shripad Krishna Kolhatkar

Despite *Sharada*'s success, it is Kolhatkar who is credited with having initiated the genre of social plays and freed the theatre from the 'Kalidas tradition'.[13]

A theatre afficianado, S.K. Kolhatkar (1871–1934) wrote his first play at 17, and acted in a Sanskrit play as a student of Deccan College

[12] V.D. Kulkarni, 'Sangit Samshaya-kallol' in Govind Ballal Deval, *Sangit Samshaya-kallol*, pp. 19–22.

[13] Varerkar, *Maza Nataki Sansar*, p. 68.

(where N.C. Kelkar was his classmate). Affected by facial paralysis at an early age in Vidarbha and conscious of his ungainly physique and gait, he shunned company and spent time reading. On arriving in Mumbai in 1892 to study law (which he later practised in Vidarbha), he was greatly impacted by the Parsi Urdu theatre's mystery, intrigue, and music; he saw these plays repeatedly. In addition to 12 plays (hardly any of them performed during the last half-century), he wrote copious essays on literary criticism, humorous pieces, and an autobiography.[14]

Kolhatkar's plays had titles with five Marathi syllables. The first one, *Vira-tanaya* (Son of a Warrior, 1896), was an imaginary tale of kings and queens, mystery and intrigue, which he had intended to offer a new Parsi company which performed Marathi plays. But it was requested by Kirloskar Company whose plays he found insipid, being then unable to appreciate classical music.[15] His second play *Muka-nayak* (The Silent Hero, 1901) was also imaginary, but advocated women's education as well as love marriages, and condemned alcoholism. Most of his other plays – *Gupta-manjush* (The Secret Chest, 1901), *Janma-rahasya* (Secret About a Birth, 1918), *Prema-shodhan* (Quest for Love, 1910) – promoted social reform. The unacted *Parivartan* (Transformation, 1917) is a readable plea for a slew of social reform issues – abolition of caste discrimination and untouchability, women's education and emancipation, support for remarriage and divorce, and opposition to ill-matched marriages, enforced widowhood, and widow-disfigurement. His later plays include the solely historical *Shiva-pavitrya* (The Holiness of Shivaji, 1924), together with *Shrama-safalya* (Labour Crowned with Success, 1929), and *Maya-vivaha.*[16] Kolhatkar admits that his heroines appear more lively and attractive than his heroes and that this was especially so after 1906 when he became acquainted (through actor Joglekar) with the beautiful, educated, and talented Hirabai Pednekar.[17]

Kolhatkar's *Sangit Mati-vikar* (Change of Heart, 1906) is an effective vehicle for social reform, though its popularity was limited.[18]

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[14] V.L. Kulkarni, *Shripad Krishna: Vangmaya-darshan*, Mumbai: Popular Book Depot, 1959, prelim pp. 11–14.

[15] Kolhatkar, *Atma-vritta*, p.11.

[16] Kale, 'Natya-vangmaya', pp. 129–31.

[17] Kolhatkar, *Atma-vritta*, p. 55.

[18] Shripad Krishna Kolhatkar, *Sangit Mati-vikar: Samajik Natak*, Pune: Modern Book Depot, 1948 (1906).

The Marathi meaning of the title is 'malady of the mind', but the playwright probably intended the Sanskrit meaning: 'change of heart'. The themes of widow remarriage and ill-matched marriage are woven into the inter-relationship of two families. The play opens with young Chakor's return from six years of studies in Japan and his being welcomed home by his affectionate older brother Manohar with mixed feelings. Although clearly overjoyed, Manohar – a widowed social reformer who runs a residential school for widows – is compelled to inform his brother of the recent tragedy suffered by Chandrika, Chakor's childhood sweetheart.[19] As Chakor says later (Act III, Scene 2), Chandrika has been 'a maiden in the morning, wife in the afternoon, and widow by nighfall' because of her recent marriage to an asthmatic old man who died of the smoke from the fireworks that celebrated the wedding.

The two brothers' nationalist and reformist credentials are established at the outset. On arriving in India, Chakor says, 'I find the touch of my subjugated motherland so much pleasanter than the touch of the free land of Japan!' But Manohar is agitated about India's 'wretched and unfortunate' state, its poverty and subjection, and the attendant mindset:

> We are becoming emaciated in body and narrow in mind! We behave obsequiously with our superiors and arrogantly with our inferiors! Outside the home we fight for our political rights with great intensity; at home we treat our own sisters with great injustice! Those of us who are reformers embrace even the contemptible customs of the foreigners, and those of us who are proud of the old ways accept even harmful customs such as child marriage. We regard cowardice as thoughtfulness, and obstinacy as high thinking! How can true well-being or real happiness exist under these conditions? (Act I, Scene 1).

Their family friend Anandrao, an elderly widower and a hypocritical 'preaching reformer', advocates widow remarriage in public but has married a young girl himself in return for his young daughter Chandrika given to another old widower. He now opposes the idea of Chandrika's remarriage, and is further instigated by his young wife Saraswati because Chandrika, if ritually 'purified' through head-shaving, can undertake cooking and other housework. Anandrao

[19] The names are suggestive: 'chandrika' means the moon and 'chakor' is a mythical bird that gazes adoringly at it.

forbids Chakor to visit Chandrika, and Anandrao's son – and Chandrika's avowedly conservative brother – plans to have Chakor excommunicated for his foreign travel. The eventuality is averted by Chakor's sister Tarangini's strategy.

A subplot revolving around Tarangini and her reformer husband also provides humour, through their quarrel followed by her disappearance and supposed death – and reappearance in disguise which attracts her 'widower' husband. This is satisfactorily resolved. This subplot also includes an unscrupulous family priest who opposes all social reform and lasciviously eyes every pretty woman; he has already seduced a widow and killed the infant born of the relationship. Now he attempts – unsuccessfully – to seduce first Saraswati (who is dissatisfied with her old husband) and then Chadrika by threatening her with head-shaving if she resists. Finally he is exposed and arrested.

In a happy ending Chakor marries Chandrika, Anandrao repents his folly, his young wife mends her ways, and Manohar proves his true reformist credentials and selflessness through many trials. The ideologically modern play is set within classical Kirloskar parameters, with the initial invocation, the Bharat-vakya in chorus, and 98 other songs.

*Sangit Vadhu-pariksha* (Testing the Bride) started as a prose play and was turned into a musical in 1928 in response to a request by the proprietor of Lalita-kaladarsha Natak Mandali.[20] The unnecessarily complicated plot (for which Kolhatkar had a penchant) centres on Prince Dhurandhar, just returned after 12 years' study abroad, trying to find a suitable bride for himself by living incognito in his capital city. To this plan only his mother (the queen of the princely state) and his trusted friend Bhargav are privy. They explain away Dhurandhar's absence by claiming that he is being kept hidden as protection from an impostor.

Disguised as an astrologer named Joshi, Dhurandhar stays with the family of Vishweshwar whose daughter Gangu, an accredited beauty, openly airs her intention of marrying the prince for his status and wealth. Gangu's friend Yamuna harbours similar ambitions, although Bhargav, assigned to protect Joshi, falls in love with her

[20] Shripad Krishna Kolhatkar, *Sangit Vadhu-pariksha*, Mumbai: V.B. Pendharkar, 1931.

and tries to win her. Bhargav's other agenda is to trace his long-lost sister. Their father had been entrusted by Prayag-pandit, the judge of the princely state, with looking after his infant daughter 18 years ago, with a generous provision for her upkeep. But this foster father absconded with the money and jewellery – except for a talisman around the girl's neck – leaving the child in the care of a traveller who was his house guest. The traveller, Vishweshwar, has raised the girl Triveni (unaware of her real parentage) in his house with warm affection, although his wife Varanasi and daughter Gangu detest her. The Cinderella-like Triveni is beautiful, modest, sincere, and loving. She and Joshi fall in love.

In an attempt to discover his sister, Bhargav inserts an advertisement in the newspaper, couched in vague but suggestive words, about 'reclaiming a valuable deposited 18 years ago'. Realising it concerns his daughter, Prayag-pandit dispatches his Kotwal (a Shudra by caste, who in turn deputes his foster son Shripati) to be present at the appointed time and place – a crematorium at midnight, selected to deter idle visitors. Only Bhargav and Joshi (sent by Vishweshwar as an interested party) are present there and assume Triveni to be the daughter of a Shudra. Triveni overhears Joshi reporting the news to Vishweshwar; she is distraught and overcome by guilt at having polluted a Brahmin family all these years, albeit unknowingly, and jumps into a well to end her life. Dhurandhar saves her and brings the injured girl inside, dripping blood. He also declares his full support for a marriage of a Brahmin man to a lower-caste woman – an *anuloma* marriage supported by the scriptures.

Sensing that Triveni's life may be endangered by her identity, Yamuna asks for her talisman and gives it to her maidservant Mhalsa to wear, thus deepening the mystery because Bhargav now thinks of Mhalsa as his sister. (Ultimately, Mhalsa and Shripati are united in a superfluous subplot.)

Meanwhile, Parthiv, searching for his cousin Dhurandhar's impostor, identifies Joshi as a look-alike who has murdered the prince. The trail of blood from the house to the well supports the suspicion, and Joshi is brought before the court to be tried by Prayag-pandit. Triveni attempts to save Joshi by unconvincingly claiming to have murdered Dhurandhar (who is deeply moved by her love). Finally, the queen's arrival at the court in response to Bhargav's desperate appeal unravels the mystery and all ends well. Three girls are tested

as possible brides and approved: Triveni for Dhurandhar, Yamuna for Bhargav, and Gangu for Parthiv.

Embedded within the convoluted plot is a progressive social message, supporting marriage by choice without parental pressure, and also inter-caste marriage, albeit in a limited sense. Its musical incarnation meant an addition of 36 songs (far fewer than in other musicals).

In his severe critique of Kolhatkar, V.L. Kulkarni emphasises the Parsi influence visible in the surfeit of intrigues and disguises. Although all his plays were staged by Marathi companies, his psyche never escaped the Parsi spell. His characters were lifeless puppets mouthing a dialogue, and never approached real-life persons with minds of their own.[21] Kulkarni also alleges that Kolhatkar tries to conflate two quite disparate strands in his plays: an unnecessarily mysterious plot and a spectrum of social reform issues. Another flaw seems to be his 'comic' characters who are usually villains who are stupid or employ witless servants for their intrigues, which would ordinarily defeat the purpose.

## Ram Ganesh Gadkari

The first playwright to be counted among the classic authors of social plays was Gadkari (1885–1919) who in his short life produced drama, poetry (under the pen name 'Govindagraj'), and humorous pieces (as 'Balakaram').[22] Born in Gujarat, he is said to have written a Gujarati play at a young age. His father's early death disrupted his schooling; he later completed the first year in Fergusson College at Pune, but lack of a degree gave him an inferiority complex. In 1906 he was appointed teacher for the boys in Kirloskar Company (and was therefore known as 'Gadkari Master'), and doubled as a door-keeper. Here he met S.K. Kolhatkar whom he came to regard as a guru.

Gadkari's dramatic corpus includes four complete plays: *Prem-sannyas* and *Sangit Punya-prabhav*, both stamped with Kolhatkar's style; *Sangit Ekach Pyala* and finally *Sangit Bhav-bandhan*. His historical *Sangit Raj-sannyas* remained incomplete, but was nevertheless performed on stage. Gadkari's first play was the incomplete farce *Vedyancha Bajar* (A Collection of Lunatics, inspired by Moliere) and

[21] Kulkarni, *Shripad Krishna*, pp. 39–42.

[22] Kale, 'Natya-vangmaya', pp. 132–33.

was completed after his death by another playwright. It was long believed that he withdrew his sole mythological play *Garva-nirvan* (1910), based on the mythic life of Bhakta Pralhad, for fear it would appear seditious in the aftermath of Jackson's assassination in 1909.[23] But the play has recently been discovered.[24]

*Prem-sannyas* (Renouncing Love, 1912), Gadkari's first – and prose – social play, is so crowded with characters in a complicated plot that S.K. Kolhatkar told him he had crammed into it enough material for four plays.[25] Confrontation between social reformers and anti-reformers forms the backdrop. This is shown through two brothers: the older Babasaheb is conventional, while Tatyasaheb, his junior by 15 years, represents the liberal new generation. Babasaheb frowns upon the free mixing and conversing of young men and women even within the family circle, and vigorously opposes widow remarriage. His two daughters Sushila and Leela are child widows temporarily housed with Tatyasaheb, where they meet their cousin Jayant and his friend Vidyadhar. Jayant and Leela have grown up together and still love each other. But after Leela's arranged marriage to another man, Jayant has married Manorama whom he comes to detest because of emotional incompatibility. The villain of the piece is Kamalakar, a seemingly innocent, reformist family friend who outdoes Iago in villainy, plotting the ruin of all and sundry without any apparent motivation.

Action is galvanised by the news that the widowed Druman has run away. She is the sister of Vasant, an England-returned and heavily anglicised lawyer who constantly valorises British customs and whose strongest term of abuse for an old-fashioned person is 'a Hindu' (with implications of 'a native'). Druman's behaviour makes the liberal Tatyasaheb harden his stand on reform: Western freedom is clearly unsuited to Indian society rooted in sex segregation, and is likely to lead young people astray. His sudden withdrawal of freedom from his daughter Veena results in her elopement with Vasant.

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[23] Varerkar, *Maza Nataki Sansar*, p. 204.

[24] The five-act play was performed in a two-act stage version in February 2014, as reported by the Marathi daily *Sakaal*, 7 January 2014.

[25] Ram Ganesh Gadkari, *Prem-sannyas* in *Sampurna Gadkari*, Khanda 1, Mumbai: Maharashtra Rajya Sahitya Sanskriti Mandal, 1984 (1912), pp. 1–135. For Kolhatkar's comment, see Pralhad Keshav Atre, 'Pradirgha Prastavana' in the same volume, p. 6.

It transpires that Druman has been seduced by Kamalakar, given birth to an infant whom she strangles at birth, and is then arrested for infanticide. This happens in the hospital run by Babasaheb who now mellows, rescues her, and comes to regard widow remarriage as acceptable – even in the case of his own daughters. But the disgraced Druman hangs herself, leaving a suicide note exposing Kamalakar's villainy.

After many twists and turns, Vidyadhar, whose overtures Sushila has consistently spurned as a staunch *pativrata*, reveals himself as her husband who was supposed to have died at an early age; and the two are united. Manorama trustingly allows Kamalakar to escort her by train to her parents' house, but he tries to molest her and she jumps out of the moving train and soon dies, after giving a dying declaration exposing Kamalakar. He finally comes by his just deserts. Meanwhile Jayant is mistakenly arrested for Manorama's murder. He is saved from the gallows at the last minute and rushes to Leela who has, however, just drunk poison, assuming him to have been hanged. He wants to kill himself in grief, but Leela prevents him. Her dying wish is for Jayant to dedicate his life to the uplift of widows like herself and he agrees. The last scene shows Jayant dressed as a sannyasi, standing by Leela's burning funeral pyre, having 'renounced love'.

In this complicated and grim story, comic relief is introduced through Gokul Visarbhole (literally, forgetful), a Brahmin who has grown up under Tatyasaheb's patronage. He constantly comments on his 'shrewish' wife's ugliness, and wholeheartedly espouses the conservative ideology ('I would rather be called an untouchable than a reformer!').

Having presented both pro- and anti-reform ideologies effectively, Gadkari avoids taking a stand. His conservative bias may be deduced from the ridicule and criticism heaped upon Veena's elopement and especially his unwillingness to show Leela's remarriage. This latter has caused a vigorous controversy: some see it as a betrayal of the reformist cause and fault him for lack of moral courage; others justify it by stressing the greater effectiveness of a tragic ending in promoting widow remarriage. Atre ascribes the tragic ending to a fear of offending the conservative section of society.[26]

Gadkari's strength is his lyrical dialogue and general mastery over language, which tempt him at times to treat drama as a novel. He is

[26] Atre, 'Pradirgha Prastavana', p. 15.

also acknowledged to have set the trend for melodrama to such an extent that after him, a 'social' play came to be equated with melodrama.[27] The impact of Parsi drama is also conspicuous in Gadkari's fantasy-filled settings.

Gadkari's first musical (and second play) *Sangit Punya-prabhav* (Power of Spiritual Merit, 1916) is not so memorable.[28] It revolves around the valence of women's *paativratya* and motherhood which ultimately shames villains into decency, in a plot located in the atmosphere of a royal court and intense intrigue. Even humour is rooted in this theme – a jealous husband who repeats ad nauseum the Marathi equivalent of 'Frailty, thy name is woman' and goes to the extent of forcing his wife to cover herself in a burkha to prevent the – remote – eventuality of her flirting with anyone and to stop men from even looking at her.

*Sangit Ekach Pyala* (Just One Glass, 1917), modelled faintly on a Shakespearean tragedy, is regarded as 'Gadkari's most popular and successful play' as well as 'the most effective Marathi tragedy'.[29] The protagonist Sudhakar, a bright and newly-qualified lawyer, is an orphan without social or financial backing but has succeeded against all odds. In the process, his excessive self-esteem is conflated with arrogance and touchiness. His younger sister Sharad is a child widow raised like his own daughter by Ramlal, an older family friend who is an unmarried philanthropist.

When the play opens, Ramlal is on his way to England to complete his medical education. Soon Sudhakar's devoted young wife Sindhu is fetched by her brother Padmakar for a four-month parental visit to cover her first delivery. Sindhu, a rich man's daughter and affectionate by nature, takes Sharad with her.

Soon after, Sudhakar takes to heart a perceived insult at a court official's hands, and his arrogant reaction results in his lawyer's licence being suspended for six months. Left alone, without moral and emotional support, he succumbs to temptation from Taliram, his drunkard clerk, to drown his sorrow in 'just one glass'. By the

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[27] Kale, 'Natya-vangmaya', p. 105.

[28] Ram Ganesh Gadkari, *Sangit Punya-prabhav* in *Sampurna Gadkari*, Khanda 1, 1984 (1916), pp. 137–286.

[29] Ram Ganesh Gadkari, *[Sangit] Ekach Pyala* in *Sampurna Gadkari*, Khanda 1, 1984 (1917), pp. 347–465. The comment comes from Atre, 'Pradirgha Prastavana', p. 119.

time Sindhu returns with her infant son, Sudhakar has turned into a drunkard himself. As a member of Taliram's new 'Arya Madira Club', he takes an oath to go to court drunk – on the expiry of his six months' suspension. This results in his licence being permanently revoked.

The loss of income leads Sudhakar to sell all his furniture and even Sindhu's ornaments to buy liquor. He is too proud to accept money from his wealthy father-in-law, but not to starve his wife and child. Taliram is ever-ready to egg him on. Sindhu, the dedicated wife, endures all without complaint and does odd jobs at home – such as folding sheaves of paper for a paper mill – which Gita, Taliram's hapless wife, manages to get for her. Gita herself is reduced to penury and starvation by Taliram's addiction and brutal behaviour, and finally seeks shelter with Sindhu.

Meanwhile, Ramlal returns from England, and discovers through an accidental physical touch that his feelings for Sharad are not 'pure' but tinged with desire. His protégé Bhagirath, whom he has saved from drink and given a purpose in life through social work, is also in love with Sharad but decides to sacrifice his love out of gratitude for Ramlal. But Ramlal, filled with self-loathing, refuses the gesture and urges the two to marry. He later gives away a part of his inheritance to the recently widowed Gita.

In a brief spell of awakening and remorse, Sudhakar attempts to reinstate himself. But he discovers that the eminent citizens who were his boon companions and had promised generous help now disown him. He takes to drink again. Sindhu's father and brother come to take her away, but she refuses, in a well-known song, to 'leave "his" feet' where she belongs (see Plate 10.1). Finally in a fit of drunken rage Sudhakar kills their infant son and batters Sindhu to death.[30] With her dying breath, Sindhu – Desdemona-like – exonerates him. Sudhakar's final act is to take his own life by drinking poison, consumed as he is by remorse and self-pity.

*Ekach Pyala* is generally regarded as a classic. Gadkari's ambition to sculpt a tragedy in the Shakespearean mode is visible in the play's broad structure. He wishes to portray Sudhakar as a larger-than-life hero – admittedly not of a high lineage or achievement, but with

[30] The powerful, tragic ending made such an impact during the first show in Mumbai that during subsequent shows many Gujarati spectators left to avoid watching it; Bodas, *Majhi Bhumika*, p. 226.

alleged intellectual brilliance and potential for extraordinary success. His 'fatal flaw' is his extreme sensitivity to real or perceived injury to his self-respect and inability to cope with it maturely. Temporarily deprived of the support of his long-time friend Ramlal and devoted wife Sindhu – and apparently unable to make new friends or even relate to ordinary individuals (as his brother-in-law and well-wisher Padmakar remarks) – he clutches at even the feeble support of Taliram's glass of liquor. Whether Gadkari has succeeded in investing Sudhakar with the grandeur of a Shakespearean tragic hero is a much-debated issue.

Shakespearean influence is also manifest in the subplot echoing the main theme. Here Gadkari presents two subplots. The love triangle of Ramlal-Sharad-Bhagirath highlights the dangerous potential of the first step towards temptation to undermine a person's integrity. Ramlal's first touch of Sharad's body – while patting her back in an affectionate fatherly gesture – makes him aware of his latent sexual desire for her, destroying in an instant a long-cherished delusion. Bhagirath's proposed self-sacrifice by allowing Ramlal to have Sharad as repayment of his debt to his guru parallels Sindhu's sacrifice of her money and possessions, her child's and her own life, in fulfilment of her duty as a pativrata.

The second subplot involves Taliram whose achievement lies in daring to bestow social prestige on his alcoholism by establishing the Arya Madira Club. Liquor is the great leveller here – eminent lawyers and common folk are boon companions, as are a shastri and a Muslim. These drinking scenes progress towards black humour and end in grotesquery attending upon Taliram's death and their inability to respond to it in their drunken stupor. Taliram's progression towards ruin and self-destruction through drink is paralleled by Sudhakar; having drunk his family out of home and hearth, he even attempts to snatch his wife's mangalsutra to pay for his liquor – following Taliram's model.

The literary critic and admirer of Gadkari, Bhimrao Kulkarni, suggests that Gadkari has even surpassed Shakespeare by creating through Sindhu a strong female figure – in contrast to Desdemona and Ophelia who go to their doom unresisting – by adding an authentic Indian touch to create a woman who triumphs through her goodness as a foil to her fallen husband. Kulkarni sees Sudhakar's path to destruction being mediated through Sindhu's paativratya, the

highest achievement of Hindu culture.[31] What Kulkarni probably means – but does not say – is that while submitting to her husband's emotional and physical violence seemingly without resistance, Sindhu verbalises a Hindu pativrata's powerlessness which constitutes her moral resistance.

*Ekach Pyala* is unanimously voted by critics as Gadkari's best play, whether or not it meets Shakespearean standards. Literary critic Shanta Gokhale suggests that this criterion itself is invalid in judging the play; at the same time she detects a mute rebellion in Sindhu's words.[32] Legends envelop the play: Gadkari is supposed to have vowed that he would portray Bal Gandharva (for whom the role of Sindhu was written) in an old torn sari, to contrast with his favourite expensive silks in wealthy roles.[33]

*Sangit Bhav-bandhan* (Bonds of Emotion, 1919) was Gadkari's last complete play – in fact he finished dictating the final part late one night and went to sleep, never to wake up again.[34] It was first performed a year after his death. This is the only one of Gadkari's plays to project a generally light, playful atmosphere, and is peopled by two fathers – Dhundiraj and Dhaneshwar – and their several children, as well as by Ghanashyam, the villain. Dhaneshwar is a crooked businessman and employer of the unscrupulous Ghanashyam who has grown up as a lonely orphan struggling to make his way in a heartless world. Ghanashyam proposes marriage to Dhaneshwar's daughter Latika, an argumentative and arrogant beauty with brains who is in love with an equally argumentative Prabhakar, Dhundiraj's foster son. The two ridicule and humiliate Ghanashyam who swears revenge. This he almost achieves by tricking the forgetful and trusting Dhundiraj into signing a false confession, and coercing him to marry his gentle and dutiful daughter Malati to old, widowed Dhaneshwar, while forcing Dhaneshwar to give him Latika in marriage. Malati suffers silently, as does Manohar whom she wants to marry.

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[31] Bhimrao Kulkarni, 'Prastavana' in Ram Ganesh Gadkari, *Sampurna Gadkari*, Bhimrao Kulkarni (ed.), Pune: Sarita Prakashan, 1984, pp. 47–49. There are two collections with the same title.

[32] Gokhale, *Playwright at the Centre*, pp. 44–46.

[33] Kale, 'Natya-vangmaya', pp. 132–33.

[34] Ram Ganesh Gadkari, *[Sangit] Bhav-bandhan* in *Sampurna Gadkari*, Khanda 2, 1984 (1919), pp. 465–620.

The plot is complicated by Ghanashyam's pressing into service his old friend Maheshwar, disguised as a blind, Kannadiga singer Kamanna, to give Latika music lessons and to steal incriminating documents from Dhaneshwar to blackmail him. At the same time, Prabhakar, forbidden to meet Latika, disguises himself as an old Kannadiga Sanskrit scholar Girsappa who is then appointed to tutor Latika.

Finally, Prabhakar and Latika unravel Ghanashyam's villainy, and all ends well. Even Ghanashyam undergoes a change of heart because of Dhundiraj's generous forgiveness.

To Gadkari's contemporary spectator, the main attraction of the play was Latika's strong character – lovable and loving, but arrogant and abrasive, apparently played to perfection by Dinanath Mangeshkar – especially because this 'shrew' is finally tamed (by Malati's sound advice). Equally attractive was the comic episode of the supposedly blind Kamanna and his tightrope-walking when confronted by the two ugly and therefore 'unmarriageable' sisters Indu and Bindu who propose marriage to him. Kamanna's broken, Kannada-inflected Marathi speech and his descriptions of the two girls' hideous appearance (coupled with their conceit) were an unending source of humour, and the actor Dinkar Dhere who immortalised this character on stage came to be known as 'Dinkar Kamanna'. Gadkari thus set the popular tradition of viewing women's ugliness as a source of humour (further discussed in Chapter 12).

*Sangit Raj-sannyas* (Renouncing Royal Privileges) unfortunately remained incomplete, but strangely enough Gadkari wrote in 1916 the first two scenes of Act I and all five scenes of Act V.[35] It captures the last days of Sambhajiraje who was betrayed by his own selfish and greedy advisors to the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, a sworn enemy of the Marathas.

The play opens on a stormy evening with Sambhajiraje standing on a bastion of the sea fort of Sindhudurg off the Konkan coast, along with his admiral Daulatrao Shirke, army chief Rayaji Malusare and others. Down below is Daulatrao's strong-willed and adventurous wife Tulashi about to get into a boat to row ashore across the stormy waves (for an unclear reason). The boat capsizes, Tulashi falls into the sea. When her husband refuses to rescue her, Sambhaji jumps into

[35] Ram Ganesh Gadkari, *[Sangit] Raj-sannyas* in *Sampurna Gadkari*, Khanda 1, 1984 (incomplete, 1916), pp. 287–346.

the sea and saves her. A strong attraction instantly develops between the two. The next scene introduces Sambhaji's corrupt archivist and equally faithless advisor, plotting together against the king for their own petty gain.

The last and powerful Act V opens with off-stage shouts that Sambhajiraje has been captured, and an on-stage confrontation between his wife Yesubai and a gloating Tulashi who has betrayed her sovereign in revenge for his casting her away after a brief interlude. Tulashi is then killed by her own father, a loyal servant of the Chhatrapati. In the fourth scene of the act, Rayaji tricks Yesubai into giving her gold anklets (worn only by royal women) to his future wife Shivangi who then wears them to pose as Yesubai. Shivangi is captured mistakenly and led away while Rayaji takes Yesubai to safety. The last scene shows Sambhajiraje imprisoned in the Mughal camp, filled with remorse for having squandered away Maratha power. In his farewell speech to his loyal servant who has reached him in disguise, he tries to make peace with his stepbrother Rajaram and wishes to convey to him the essence of the 'royal condition': 'A king is a sovereign who does not give himself up to enjoyment. The enjoyment of a kingdom means renunciation of royal privileges!' (Act V, Scene 5).

In his notes Gadkari has labelled this a play based on a principle – that royal duties and responsibilities need to be dissociated from pleasure and privilege. As an incarnation of divinity, a king is compelled to renounce both desire and enjoyment that lesser mortals are entitled to. Sambhaji comes to a tragic end because he forgets his responsibilities. The play was written for Balwant company (which staged it in an incomplete state), with Shivangi's role (limited to Act V, Scene 4, filled out with 5 songs) created explicitly for Dinanath Mangeshkar who is said to have excelled in it.[36] The play was completed on the basis of Gadkari's notes by V.N. Kothivale in 1971 and published in 1973.[37]

Gadkari's very first play showed his distinctiveness: a combination of intense pathos, lyricism, and humour. Such was his stylistic

[36] Prabhakar Jathar, *Dina Dise Maja Dina-rajani*, Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1990, pp. 30, 33.

[37] Ram Ganesh Gadkari and V.N. Kothivale, *Sangit Sampurna Raj-sannyas*, Pune: Shri Nath Prakashan, 1973. Gadkari's notes are reproduced in the book on pp.195–202.

brilliance that Atre labels him the only Marathi writer after Vishnushastri Chiplunkar (the self-styled 'Shivaji of the Marathi language') to have left a permanent imprint on Marathi prose.[38] The pivot of his popularity was his conservative ethos reflected in valorising Indian culture, Indian life and the Indian pativrata (who dominates each of his plays).[39]

K.N. Kale traces the deep impact of Parsi theatre on *Prem-sannyas* and *Punya-prabhav* – mediated by Kolhatkar and visible in his weaving together in imaginative language a complicated narrative pervaded by mystery and a heightened sense of melodrama. Improbable sets abound. *Prem-sannyas* opens in a railway station; later (Act II, Scene 6) Manorama jumps out of a compartment when her train has stopped on a bridge, is entangled in the cables attached to its columns, and later rescued. Among the gory scenes are Druman's corpse hanging by a rope and Kamalakar's later entry carrying her severed head. The play ends with Leela's burning funeral pyre. *Raj-sannyas* opens with Sambhaji jumping from a bastion into stormy waves. The technical difficulties involved in staging such scenes (discussed in Chapter 9) are hardly ever noticed by critics. (Even Atre only points out the numerous inconsistencies in Gadkari's plots and characterisation.) Except for *Ekach Pyala* – the only completely realistic play, set in the home milieu – all others contain scenes impossible to recreate on the Marathi stage of the time (or even now).

Beautiful language, intense emotional appeal, and a noble ideal are, according to Kale, the hallmark of a Parsi melodrama and lavishly used by Gadkari.[40] Ideologically Gadkari nullified both Deval's and Kolhatkar's concern for social reform.[41] He also specialised in inordinately long speeches that form dialogues. But then Gadkari's plays have consistently been treated as literary classics rather then play-texts. In fact one wonders whether they would not have been more successful as novels.



[38] Atre, 'Pradirgha Prastavana', pp. 2, 6.
[39] *Ibid.*, p. 30.
[40] Kale, 'Natya-vangmaya', p. 105.
[41] *Ibid.*, pp. 103–04.

# 6

# 'Natyacharya' Khadilkar

## Ideology and Entertainment

**Plate 6.1:** B.G. Tilak and K.P. Khadilkar, c. 1915.

The forceful and towering figure of Krishnaji Prabhakar Khadilkar (1872–1948) has remained difficult to slot mainly because of his varied and inextricably intertwined interests – political ideology (first Tilakite and then Gandhian), journalism, drama, and spiritualism. His life was as great an adventure as his prolific and diverse literary output. His two-volume collection of journalistic pieces, five-volume history of

World War I, and six books on spiritual topics, in addition to 15 plays easily earned the label 'Khadilkar Era' for the period 1900–1940.[1]

Khadilkar's ideologically motivated prose plays, articulating a strong nationalist protest under the camouflage of historical and mythological themes, dominated theatre until about 1910 when he unpredictably veered towards the far more popular romantic musicals, straddling the two genres with ease. It is one of the ironies of history that his light musicals – especially the all-time favourites *Svayamvar* and *Manapaman* – have long survived the politically explosive *Kichak-vadh* which is now all but erased from the collective memory.

Born in Sangli and educated mostly at Pune and Mumbai, Khadilkar was fascinated by theatre and also came early under B.G. Tilak's ideological spell which led him to political militancy coupled with social conservatism.[2] His core beliefs were laid bare in his first published article – review of a book about the learning of Brahmins in a Marathi monthly – spelling out what amounted to the 'Brahmin man's burden': 'It is the task of Brahmins to present to the people sublime ideas and high thinking. If Brahmins abandon this great task and pursue self-interest, the whole country will undoubtedly be enfeebled'; and, 'The educated class [of Brahmins] is meant for the good of the nation, the nation is not meant for the good of the educated'.[3]

As a fresh college graduate immersed in the study of English literature, Khadilkar essayed his first play *Sawai Madhavrao Yancha Mrityu* (The Death of Sawai Madhavrao) in 1892. He published it serially in 1895–1896, as a book in 1905 after incorporating some of the instant and wide-ranging critiques, and saw it performed the same year. (All his prose plays were performed by Maharashtra Natak Mandali.) A further revision was published in 1906.[4]

The play – one of his best, though generally neglected by drama critics – is simultaneously a revival of the Maratha past partly inspired

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[1] There were several, and sometimes overlapping, 'eras' in Marathi literature.

[2] Kashinath H. Khadilkar, *Deshabhakta Krishnaji Prabhakar Khadilkar urfa Kakasaheb Yanche Charitra*, Pune: D.T. Joshi, 1949.

[3] Cited in Khadilkar, *Deshabhakta*, pp. 34–35.

[4] Krishnaji Prabhakar Khadilkar, *Sawai Madhavrao Yancha Mrityu*, Mumbai: Yashawant Krishna Khadilkar, 1964 (1906).

by Khare-shastri's patriotic Maratha history, a commentary on contemporary politics, and a conscious effort to achieve dramatic tension in a Shakespearean vein (highlighted in his preface) through an imagined confrontation between surrogates for Hamlet and Iago.[5] The popular perception of young Peshwa Sawai Madhavrao, driven to suicide by the domineering Nana Phadnis, provided the dramatic potential for a brooding, impulsive Hamlet; 'Keshav-shastri' was then invented in the image of Iago as artistic licence – drawing a protest from the history-conscious Pune critics.[6]

The opening discussion provides the context: the incarceration of Bajirao – Madhavrao's cousin and a putative claimant to his office, who in fact succeeded him later as Bajirao II – at Shivneri fort under the fort-keeper's lax supervision. Nana has flouted Madhavrao's express wish and ordered the arrest and death of the 'treasonous' fort-keeper, the conduit for the clandestine correspondence between the cousins.

Madhavrao has been assisted in this politically sensitive correspondence by Babasaheb, the father of his wife Yashoda. Babasaheb now leaves Pune in a rush to save himself, but surprisingly, Yashoda's mother, Aaisaheb, informs Nana against her own husband to curry favours. Subsequently, Keshav-shastri, a wily Brahmin scholar and priest, insinuates into Madhavrao's mind the idea that a long clandestine affair between Aaisaheb and Nana (reputed to be a womaniser) means that Yashoda is possibly Nana's daughter. The shastri further reinforces the rumours of intimacy between Nana and Madhavrao's mother, the widowed Gangabai (who had given birth to him after Narayanrao's death), thus sowing suspicions about Madhavrao's real father. The shocking possibility of both he and his wife being Nana's illegitimate children and thus half-siblings gradually destabilises Madhavrao's mental balance. He shuns the presence of his once-beloved Yashoda, and ultimately jumps to his death from the upper storey of his palace, Shaniwar Wada.

There is a great deal of political and personal plotting involving Keshav-shastri, and minor characters are introduced to provide comic relief. In this as in Khadilkar's other plays, comic interludes (of a

[5] For Vasudevshastri Khare's historical and literary output, see Chapter 7.

[6] For example, V.L. Kulkarni, *Natakakar Khadilkar: Ek Abhyas*, Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1978 (1965), p. 12.

not very high order) seem to be awkwardly inserted as an inevitable concession to audience demand.

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Before the play was performed, Khadilkar came into contact with N.B. Kanitkar at whose suggestion he started working for Tilak's *Kesari*, after completing his legal studies in Mumbai. His first article on a theme suggested by Tilak was immediately published as an editorial in 1896. In June 1897 there was a strong public protest at Pune against the special plague officer for his draconian measures to control the bubonic plague epidemic and ended in his murder. Alarmed by the open Brahmin disaffection, the government jailed Tilak for instigating the murder through seditious writings. During Tilak's absence, Khadilkar wrote many of *Kesari*'s editorials.

In the 1890s Khadilkar was sent by *Kesari* to the famine-affected areas of central India. Later, during a visit to Bijapur, Khadilkar thought of writing an explicitly political play to facilitate popular awakening through drama in tandem with journalism. The result was *Kanchangadchi Mohana* (Mohana of Kanchangad, 1898), his first play to be staged.[7] The hero Prataprao is a loyalist of the Hindu kingdom of Vijayanagar which was defeated by Muslim Bijapur in 1565. About three decades after the event Prataprao attempts to save Kanchangad, an outpost of former Vijayanagar, from further Muslim depredations, but is betrayed by Pilajirao Mane who has secretly switched his allegiance. With the help of another sardar who is smitten with Prataprao's brave and faithful wife Mohana, Mane finally defeats and kills Prataprao. (The obvious parallel with his contemporary confrontation between nationalism and complicity with the colonial state for personal gain is discussed in Chapter 12.)

Subsequently Khadilkar's personal life took quite an adventurous turn. He spent most of his time from 1901 to 1904 in Nepal, secretly manufacturing guns in a factory allegedly producing roof tiles.

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*Kichak-vadh* (The Killing of Kichak, 1907) is Khadilkar's best-known prose play, intended as an eloquent literary weapon of Tilakite militant

[7] Krishnaji Prabhakar Khadilkar, *Kanchangadchi Mohana*, Mumbai: Yashawant Krishna Khadilkar, 1950 (1898).

nationalism, disguising a political allegory about the freedom struggle as a mythological episode.[8] The play's greatest strength was the audiences' familiarity, especially in Khadilkar's time, with the *Mahabharat* story of the slaying of Kichak. The context is the Pandavs' one-year period of living incognito, following their 12 years of forest exile. The whole is a result of the fateful game of dice in which Yudhishthir, the oldest of the five Pandav brothers, has successively staked and lost his kingdom, himself, his brothers, and his wife to Duryodhan, the oldest of the Kaurav brothers. During this 13th year, the Pandavs arrive at the court of Virat, an upright and pious king whose power is wholly propped up by his brother-in-law and army chief Kichak. Yudhishthir is now disguised as the Brahmin scholar Kankabhat, Bhim as Ballabh the cook, and Draupadi as the dasi Sairandhri.

Kichak has just returned from a visit to the Kauravs and been honoured with gifts and titles (including the particularly galling title of 'Draupadi-pati', the – future – husband of Draupadi). During the welcome ceremonies he sees and fancies Sairandhri, and wishes at once to induct her into his harem. Sairandhri pleads with Virat's queen (Kichak's sister) and then with Kichak's wife to protect her virtue and her paativratya, abusing Kichak in strong terms. The more she resists, the more he desires her, despite the pleas of his wife and sister.

Kankabhat, Ballabh, and Sairandhri hold secret meetings to plan a strategy to extricate her from this predicament. Both she and Ballabh support the killing of Kichak, but Kankabhat advises restraint, patience, peaceful resistance, and winning the protection of the two royal women. But the two women prove powerless and when Kichak is about to assault Sairandhri, Bhim-as-Ballabh kills him in unarmed combat in a climactic scene.

The play also provides comic relief through minor characters, especially at the cost of the dasi Saudamini who is repeatedly ridiculed for her ugliness and for lusting after handsome men (both qualities making her a perfect foil to Sairandhri) – by an elderly Brahmin priest, himself rendered ridiculous by his greed and gluttony. Much of the 'humour' is crude and shocking in a writer of Khadilkar's calibre.

The play became politically explosive as a transparent allegory for Lord Curzon's partition of Bengal in 1905, while the Extremists

[8] Krishnaji Prabhakar Khadilkar, *Kichak-vadh*, Mumbai: Yashawant Krishna Khadilkar, 1950 (1907).

and Moderates debated the correct political path; it was banned as seditious from 1910 to 1926 (as discussed in Chapter 12).

Almost as an anti-climax came Khadilkar's next play *Bayakanche Banda* (Women's Rebellion) the same year, based on a mythological episode. Initially performed and published as a prose play in 1907, it was made into a musical and published as such in 1935.[9] The play opens with Nati chiding Sutradhar for his hurried prayers offered to a goddess, because 'these wretched men' are casual about female deities. Immediately enter two women armed with swords, expressing their outrage that some 'wretched men' have been spotted near the boundary of the female kingdom they are guarding; they rant at the men when they approach. Arjun also enters, disguised as an ambassador of the Pandavs. He carries letters from king Shwetaketu to his daughter Pramila, queen of the female kingdom in the Himalayan foothills, who – despite belonging to the 'weaker sex' – has had the temerity to capture the horse let loose by the Pandavs as part of their horse sacrifice to celebrate their sovereignty over a large and ever-increasing empire.

The scenes that follow introduce Pramila, her guru Satyamaya, and the women who serve as her chief minister, army commander, and magistrate. Pramila's father's letter reveals his defeat by the Pandav army and their offer to return his kingdom only if Pramila marries Arjun. This is greeted by an anachronistically expressed general protest – freedom-loving women cannot submit to the shackles of marriage:

> These 'wretched' Pandavs have incarcerated their own women in a Zenana. Our Maharani-saheb will, by the grace of Goddess Adimaya, accomplish the meritorious deed of incarcerating the Pandavs themselves in a Mardana. Until then this female kingdom should not be exposed to the contamination of men (Act I, Scene 2).

The letter claims that Arjun proposes 'a marriage based on equality' in return for the sacrificial horse; the women would thus submit to Pandav sovereignty – somehow without admitting defeat.

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[9] Krishnaji Prabhakar Khadilkar, *Sangit Bayakanche Banda*, Mumbai: Yashawant Krishna Khadilkar, 1963 (1935). The theme of women's contestation of male dominance had already been handled by both M.V. Kelkar and V.G. Banavalikar independently of each other in 1887; Dandekar, *Pauranik Natake*, pp. 233–34.

From the outset the women's words display false bravado and shallow, childish notions of gender disparity. Predictably Pramila's associates succumb to male charms and to the pull of conjugality and motherhood. Pramila falls in love with Arjun who has assiduously wooed her with romantic flattery while proving his superior strength and valour. To complete his triumph, Arjun even rescues Satyamaya – his persistent ideological enemy – from the roaring waters of a river into which she is thrown by a bridge collapse. She then withdraws into a cave to continue her meditation and penance, and the female kingdom disintegrates when its leaders willingly enter into 'marriages of equality' with the men who profess to be 'enslaved' by their charms and their love. Women's brief spell of self-sufficiency and resistance to male power ends with the restoration of the 'natural' grid of patriarchal norms.

About this time, Khadilkar's political journalism peaked. In the wake of violent disturbances in Bengal in 1908, the government closed down many newspapers. Khadilkar insisted, in a series of militant articles in *Kesari*, that the bomb explosions in Bengal were a response to an oppressive government. As *Kesari*'s editor, Tilak was tried for two seditious articles – written by Khadilkar – and sent to Mandalay in Burma (now Myanmar) for six years. Khadilkar then became the chief editor of both *Kesari* and *The Mahratta*, but was gradually edged out by N.C. Kelkar.

Reverting to his political preoccupation, Khadilkar wrote his second prose play about Maratha history, *Bhaubandaki* (A Family Feud, 1909).[10] Also based on Khare-shastri's history, it covers the period just preceding *Sawai Madhavrao*. The young and inexperienced Narayanrao is the reigning Peshwa – invested after the premature death of his able older brother Madhavrao – with the help and consent of their paternal uncle Raghoba. A near claimant to the throne, Raghoba (with his ambitious wife Anandibai) is now under house arrest in Shaniwar Wada on suspicion of conspiring against Narayanrao. Raghoba has just received unexpected help from Bhosale of Nagpur in the form of mercenary soldiers from North India known as *gardi*s who free him and Anandibai. While the gardis await written orders about Narayanrao's fate, Anandibai – with Raghoba's half-

[10] Krishnaji Prabhakar Khadilkar, *Bhaubandaki*, Mumbai: Yashawant Krishna Khadilkar, 1950 (1909).

hearted connivance – tampers with the order, changing one crucial letter: the word *dharave* (should be 'arrested') now reads *marave* (should be 'killed'). Narayanrao is dragged away, screaming for his uncle to spare his life and even promising to abdicate in his favour, and is killed (off-stage).

Oscillating between remorse and exultation, Raghoba secretly tries out his new robes of the Peshwa's office before he is formally invested – and starts hallucinating, Macbeth-style. While admiring himself in the mirror, he sees his father, the great Peshwa Bajirao instead, eyeing him with an accusatory mien. Finding him thus destabilised, Anandibai uses her feminine wiles to coax him into good humour. But his internal conflict continues, as does the conflict between his righteous self against Anandibai's ruthlessness – on behalf of her husband and her unborn child who, she is convinced, is a son who will be the next Peshwa Bajirao. (This is a deft and ominous touch by Khadilkar, because this is how history unfolded.)

Raghoba's investiture is delayed because the requisite blessing from eminent Brahmins is withheld at the instigation of Ramshastri, an outspoken, upright, and learned Brahmin who is the Peshwa's chief judge. Ramshastri fortuitously receives evidence of Raghoba having ordered Narayanrao's murder. He publicly condemns Raghoba, insisting that life-long renunciation is the only suitable atonement for his heinous crime.[11] Meanwhile, some senior statesmen have been plotting to invest Narayanrao's posthumous child – if male – as the next Peshwa. The play ends with the investiture of this infant as Sawai Madhavrao.

The play projects the need for political unity; its dominant subtext – though ultimately of scant importance – is the need for unity between the two major Brahmin sub-castes, Konkanasthas (or Chitpavans, originally from Konkan) and Deshasthas (from the Deccan area). This is developed through some minor characters also responsible for humour – including two 'learned' Brahmin shastris belonging to the two sub-castes, paired with wives belonging to the opposite sub-castes.

Unlike *Sawai Madhavrao*, this play makes no derogatory references to the British; but there are barely veiled references to the need for

[11] The popular belief is different: that Ramshastri ordered capital punishment for Raghoba, which was not implemented.

people's power and unity, as for example in Ramshastri's advice at the conclusion of the play:

> Our internal disputes – whether individual or caste-related – should not reach such an extreme as to harm our religion and our country. If you agree, insist on conditioning yourselves and others to work together [as people's representatives] in every task, big and small – from farming in villages to handling imperial power (Act V, Scene 3).

A case is thus made for Indian political representation, with ambiguity as to whether it is to be under the British imperial umbrella.

In 1910 Khadilkar was involved with Kirloskar Company through his old friend and fellow student S.K. Kolhatkar (whose play the company was then rehearsing). At the company's behest Khadilkar wrote *Sangit Manapaman* (Honour and Humiliation), which was first staged in Mumbai in 1911 to become an instant and permanent success.[12] (Khadilkar was the first major playwright who was musically untrained. During this time he studied music with Bhaskarbuva Bakhale who later set the lyrics to music for Gandharva Company; Bakhale's Bharat Gayan Samaj allegedly owed its existence to Khadilkar's persuasion.)

*Sangit Manapaman* is set in an indeterminate period and location, against the backdrop of a war between Prithvidhar (literally, the sovereign of the earth, who seems to rule western India and adjoining territories) and Uttaradhipati (the sovereign of the North) – faintly gesturing to the Maratha challenge to Mughal supremacy.

Dhairyadhar (literally, one possessed of valour), one of Prithvidhar's army chiefs, has recently proven his military prowess in battle. On his way home he stops at the mansion of an esteemed elderly sardar, Babasaheb, to visit his Durga temple. Babasaheb wants his younger daughter Bhamini to marry Dhairyadhar, but she openly spurns him for his lack of wealth. She shares a love of wealth with her older sister Akkasaheb and the latter's husband Vilasadhar (one given to pleasure). All three are dazzled by the affluent Lakshmidhar

[12] Krishnaji Prabhakar Khadilkar, *Sangit Manapaman*, Mumbai: Yashawant Krishna Khadilkar, 1950 (1911).

(one possessed of wealth), an effete sardar decked out in ornaments from top to toe. Given to a life of luxury, he wishes to marry pretty Bhamini.

But Babasaheb stipulates that before Bhamini can marry anyone she has to spend one month near Dhairyadhar's military camp. She does so, pretending to be a rural girl named Vanamala. Dhairyadhar, smarting under wealthy Bhamini's insult, is attracted to this simple and charming girl; she also comes under his spell, realising the superiority of valour over wealth.

Dhairyadhar is soon made a 'three-star sardar' and awarded a jahagir of Rs 25 lakh for his military success; like a good leader he distributes cash rewards among his troops. Babasaheb renews his proposal to marry Bhamini to Dhairyadhar – who now spurns it, vowing to marry Vanamala. Her real identity is revealed at the last moment.

The main characters in this flimsily constructed play represent a clash of distinct – but ultimately innocuous – preferences and lifestyles and are thus one-dimensional. The oft-repeated arguments about the merit of valour over wealth hold no dramatic interest, nor does Bhamini's inexplicable change of heart – except perhaps as a pale version of the ever-popular taming of the shrew. The plot is obviously a series of pegs to hang 49 songs (of which 'only' about 29 are sung nowadays) besides the three initial invocations and the last chorus. Some of the songs are among the eternal favourites.

Also in 1911 came Khadilkar's prose play *Prema-dhwaja* (The Banner of Love). By now he had several books to his credit, and after leaving *Kesari*, he managed with royalties from his books and performances of his plays – his condition being that the theatre company which performed his new play should pay him three times the amount of the highest earnings at the first town where it was performed.[13]

*Sangit Vidya-haran* (Theft of Knowledge) was published in 1913 and performed the same year by Kirloskar Company (which had already developed internal dissensions). Khadilkar's third musical play to achieve some success, it was based on the well-known *Mahabharat*

[13] Bodas, *Majhi Bhumika*, pp. 200–01.

story of Kacha and Devayani, lovers belonging to the warring communities of devas and *daitya*s, or gods and demons.[14]

The learned sage Shukracharya, the guru of the daityas, has obtained through severe penance the much-coveted, secret *sanjivani* mantra which revives the dead. The resultant invincibility of the daityas causes great anxiety to the devas who send Kacha, the son of their guru, sage Brihaspati, to the world of the liquor-loving daityas to win both Devayani and sanjivani. Kacha and Devayani fall in love, and he persuades her to give up drink – an addiction to which her father has already fallen prey.

Despite the combined efforts of Kacha and Devayani, Shukracharya refuses to impart the knowledge of sanjivani to Kacha. The daitya king, fearing Kacha's eventual success, orders that he be killed and his body cut into pieces. But Shukracharya revives him at Devayani's pleading. A second attempt on Kacha's life succeeds, and his body is burnt to ashes which are mixed in the drink fed to Shukracharya. But this creates a dire and unanticipated dilemma. The moment Shukracharya tries to revive anyone, Kacha would automatically be revived – and get possession of the sanjivani mantra. In the end Shukracharya agrees to revive Kacha again at Devayani's pleading, after making her promise not to marry him but treat him like a brother – 'born' of the same father. Kacha comes to life and, having heard the conversation, agrees to the sibling relationship, vows to stay single if he cannot marry Devayani, and returns to his own world. The defeated Shukracharya is consumed with self-hatred and guilt for having lost everything for drink.

In his preface to the first edition, Khadilkar admits to having made 'acceptable' changes to the mythological story in order to explicate it and also to enhance the appropriate 'mood'. He has also added the character of Shishyavar, a drunken disciple of Shukracharya, in order to dramatise revulsion for drink. Unfortunately this exercise succeeds only in trivialising a poignant story; the 'humour' introduced by the minor characters – mainly related to eulogising liquor – is hardly amusing, nor are the songs generally memorable. The success of the play remains something of a puzzle to the 21st century reader.

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[14] Krishnaji Prabhakar Khadilkar, *Sangit Vidya-haran*, Mumbai: Nilakantha Y. Khadilkar, 1972 (1913).

In 1914 Tilak was released from prison and Khadilkar re-joined *Kesari*. He wrote the prose play *Sattva-pariksha* (A Test of Virtue) based on the generally favourite story of Harishchandra and Taramati in 1915. The possibility of the play being banned was ultimately averted.

In 1916 came Khadilkar's *Sangit Svayamvar* written for the newly set up Gandharva Company, and according to the actor Bodas, mainly for Gandharva himself as a 'one-man show'.[15] The playwright charged Rs 3,400 for the play's monopoly rights; it became popular among all the ethnic communities in Mumbai and raked in money. Its appeal depended primarily on music – and Gandharva's appearance – which made acting redundant (see Plate 8.1).[16] This sowed the seed of the decline of drama, alleges Bodas, claiming further that all Khadilkar's subsequent plays were written to showcase Gandharva.

In *Svayamvar*, Khadilkar recasts the popular mythological romance of Rukmini and Krishna to self-avowedly arouse proper emotional moods and emphasise the 'noble aspects' of the protagonists to parallel contemporary young romance, in the spirit of Kirloskar's *Saubhadra*.

The play opens with Rukmini's brother Rukmi and his friend Shishupal – who can aid Rukmi's political ambitions and who is Rukmini's most persistent suitor – objecting to Krishna's arrival to attend Rukmini's *svayamvar*. The two attack him but are easily defeated (off-stage) by Krishna who is received by Rukmini with suitable shyness and then courteously by her father, King Bhishmak of Vidarbha. Rukmi threatens his sister with dire consequences if she fails to conduct herself 'suitably' on the occasion of her svayamvar.

Krishna, not being a crowned king, has his credentials as a suitor questioned. A royal friend immediately offers him his own kingdom and has him crowned. But Rukmi prevents his sister from garlanding Krishna and disrupts the svayamvar. Rukmini chooses to avoid bloodshed by temporarily relinquishing her right to select her husband, and requests that her marriage be postponed for a year, because 'only a good daughter can be a good wife' (as her song goes). Her diplomatic intervention elicits acclaim from Krishna.

A few months later, rumours are heard of Krishna's death during an attack on Mathura by his enemies. Rukmini discounts the rumour, even as Rukmi returns home and tries to coerce her into marrying

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[15] Krishnaji Prabhakar Khadilkar, *Sangit Svayamvar*, Mumbai: Yashawant Krishna Khadilkar, 1950 (1916); Bodas, *Majhi Bhumika*, p. 208.

[16] Bodas, *Majhi Bhumika*, p. 209.

Shishupal and to usurp power by imprisoning his father. News is soon received that Krishna has escaped unhurt and established himself at Dwaraka. Rukmini tries to avert disaster by agreeing to marry Shishupal after two months, on condition that Krishna is informed of the proposed marriage. Her hope is that Krishna would meanwhile abduct and marry her.

While Rukmini day-dreams about being one of Krishna's adoring milk-maids, he arrives in disguise as a cowherd looking for a suitable bride for his master, Krishna. She tries to convince him of her own suitability; he reveals himself, and the two are married in a nearby temple. They leave for Dwaraka after taking formal leave of her parents. The play ends with Krishna defeating Rukmi and Shishupal yet again, but sparing their lives at the intercession of Rukmini who wishes to avoid bloodshed on the happy occasion.

The light and entertaining play has somewhat acceptable comic relief provided by a Brahmin astrologer who prevaricates, presenting past events as his predictions, telling people the kind of future they want to hear, and promising success simultaneously to opposing factions. But the main attraction is the music. The relatively thin plot and opulent sets provide a setting for 50 songs, in addition to the invocations and introductory songs. Originally songs were allotted, in addition to Krishna and Rukmini, also to the king and queen, Rukmi, Shishupal, Rukmini's friend and also her two dasis, two court poets, and a group of girls. (The songs are now usually reduced to 24, with only one initial invocation.)

A clear disruption marked Khadilkar's trajectory after Tilak's death in 1920, especially as he was deliberately kept out of Tilak's papers by the N.C. Kelkar faction. His muse dried up and could not be recovered despite active participation in the Gandhian movement (in company of some other staunch ex-Tilakites). Ideological conflict articulated through a known mythological or historical episode had been his forte. He now lost his grip and continued with the routine and uninspired use of mythological plots to express his favourite principles, without regard to artistic crafting. He was aware of his inability to portray a strong conflict of passions; a conflict of ideas seemed far less attractive.[17]

[17] Shelke, 'Natak', p. 372.

This is clear in *Sangit Draupadi* (1920), at best a short-lived success. The opening scene has Duryodhan and his maternal uncle Shakuni groping about in the hall of illusions that the Pandavs have created – and rendered completely ridiculous. Bhim and Draupadi voice open amusement; this is their revenge against the derision meted out by the Kauravs earlier. Other members of the hapless Kaurav party fare equally poorly and are finally extricated by Dharma (or Yudhishthir).

The old rivalries and jealousies reach such a pitch that the Kauravs start plotting deadly revenge. Shakuni happens to acquire a special pair of loaded dice from a gambler (who, along with his two wives, provides comic relief). Duryodhan invites the Pandavs to a game of dice; the reported result is that Dharma has staked and lost successively his possessions, kingdom, all his brothers, and himself. Finally, he has staked and lost his wife Draupadi as well. Duhshasan wants Draupadi to serve as a dasi at the Kaurav court, and drags her away, threatening dishonour. Draupadi insists that she is not a dasi, but a free woman – because Dharma had staked her when he had already lost himself and become a dasa, and thus had no rights over her any longer. But none of the elder statesmen at court is willing to endorse her view. She prays to Krishna who rescues her by providing an unending supply of saris when Duhshasan attempts to disrobe her.

The play is nondescript in comparison with Khadilkar's other plays, but was staged enthusiastically and expensively by Gandharva company which was sorely in need of novelty.

In 1920, Khadilkar was invited to serve as editor of Mumbai's new weekly paper *Lokamanya* and left Pune to settle down there. He later resigned and started his own paper, *Nava Kaal* (claiming a relationship with the earlier *Kaal* run by S.M. Paranjape whom he knew and greatly admired).

Khadilkar's later plays – three musicals and a prose play – did not enjoy much fame. *Sangit Tridandi Sanyas* (1923), based on the same theme as Kirloskar's *Sangit Saubhadra*, was first performed in 1936 by Sulochana Sangit Mandali. *Sangit Menaka* (1926) was written for Gandharva Company, as was the prose play *Savati-matsar* (Jealousy of a Rival Wife, 1927) about Kaikeyi's jealousy for Kausalya.

In 1929 Khadilkar's editorials in *Nava Kaal*, critiquing the government for public unrest, led to his imprisonment for sedition for almost a year at Ahmadabad.

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Khadilkar wrote the text of *Sangit Savitri* specifically for Gandharva Company (with the lead role for Gandharva) while in Ahmadabad jail in 1929, and the songs were added after his return to Mumbai, in consultation with Gandharva and his music director. The play was published and performed in 1933.[18]

Young Savitri travels around in a golden chariot to choose a husband for herself, with permission from her father, the king of Madradesh. On reaching the hermitage of sage Gautam, she falls in love with Satyavan who devotedly serves his father, the ousted and now blind king Ashwapati, who is undergoing a cure there. The handsome, brave, pious, and soft-spoken prince reciprocates Savitri's love, but hesitates to declare himself because of his impoverished state. Savitri's royal parents are impressed by the ousted prince and his potential to regain the throne, but are informed by the sage Narad that Satyavan is destined to die after a year. All three try to dissuade Savitri, but she wants to enjoy at least one year of marital happiness. Impervious to the dire prophecy she 'accepts [life at] "his" feet along with the fact of "his" death'. Having chosen him, she reasons with her parents, 'marrying anyone else would mean tarnishing my own honour and yours with the stain of adultery' (Act III, Scene 3).

A year later, just as the first wedding anniversary is to be celebrated, Satyavan falls down in a deathly faint and is approached by the messengers of Yam, the god of death, to carry away his life-force. Savitri bravely resists them. Yam himself appears on the scene, and is saluted reverently by her. After a discussion about life, death, and the valence of paativratya, Yam grants her some boons – other than her husband's life – and she strategically manages to have his life restored. Yam is impressed by her persistence and wifely devotion, her fearlessness in the face of death and indifference to temptations. Satyavan comes to life, exactly at the moment that Savitri's parents arrive. Throughout this general discourse on paativratya, touches of

[18] Krishnaji Prabhakar Khadilkar, *Sangit Savitri*, Mumbai: Yashawant Krishna Khadilkar, 1964 (1933).

shallow humour (characteristic of Khadilkar) are provided by one of Ashwapati's ministers and his son.

Generally the special effects visualised by Khadilkar are quite extraordinary: *Draupadi* has the hall of illusions and opulent scenes of the royal court, and *Savitri* shows on stage a rogue elephant which Satyavan tames, as well as a forest fire, a tiger, and a cobra to threaten Savitri.

In his later years Khadilkar turned increasingly to Vedic philosophy, and was much enfeebled by partial paralysis. His major contribution was over long before his death in independent India in 1948.

The noted literary critic V.L. Kulkarni identifies as characteristic of Khadilkar's plays, a popular plot pivoting on extraordinary individuals – male and female – as representatives of specific ideological viewpoints that clash.[19] The clearest examples are *Kichak-vadh* and *Bhaubandaki*. His most powerful plays are undergirded by Tilak's militant nationalism and preoccupation with independence. At the same time, the spiritual dimension of Khadilkar's personality surfaces through characters like Ramshastri who is prepared to resign his post as chief judge and spend the rest of his life in religious rituals. The strongest literary influences on Khadilkar were Sanskrit drama and Shakespeare (as seen in his character-based plays and introduction of subplots, though the latter were not always essential or successful). But his language is neither ornate nor lyrical; it is direct and to the point, deployed simply as a medium to express a certain line of thought and ideology. Khadilkar made liberal use of mythological and historical themes, imposing his own interpretation on them to introduce novelty despite audience familiarity with the material.



[19] Kulkarni, *Natakakar Khadilkar*, pp. 115–39.

# 7

# Selected Renowned Playwrights

## B.V. Varerkar's Thematic Diversity

**Plate 7.1:** Bhargavram Vitthal Varerkar, c. 1916.

The dramatic hegemony of the Pune–Mumbai urban axis was successfully challenged by B.V. Varerkar (1883–1964) from the small Konkan town of Malvan near Ratnagiri. His career span of about six decades (from 1908 to 1960), his breadth of genres and versatility of themes have rarely been equalled.[1] Also notable were his generally progressive outlook and ability to dramatise topics of current interest,[2] especially as he was compelled to juggle a job as a low-paid, overworked postal clerk in various Konkan towns with creative writing for 20 years. Only then could he afford to devote himself entirely to writing inspired by novelty and seriousness of purpose.

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[1] In addition to 37 plays, he wrote 27 novels, short stories, 12 detective stories, and translated 47 Bengali novels into Marathi; Prabha Ganorkar et al. (eds), *Sankshipta Marathi Vangmaya Kosh* (1920–2003), Mumbai: G.R. Bhatkal Foundation, 2004, pp. 645–46.

[2] Gazetteers Department, *Maharashtra State Gazetteers*, pp. 169–70.

Varerkar's first play *Sangit Kunjavihari* (performed in 1908, published in 1914) emphasised the sublime and spiritual nature of the Radha–Krishna relationship, to correct its popular perception as erotic love. It concludes with Radha's husband, Krishna's parents, and all their friends, as well as the residents of Vrindavan being enlightened about the salience of spiritual devotion.[3] Being opposed to a profusion of songs as detrimental to the plot, Varerkar succeeded in reducing their number to 'only' about 70.[4] Pervaded by a Gujarati ambience in terms of location and costumes, the play became very popular among Mumbai's Gujarati community, replicating Vishnudas's success half a century earlier with his *Rasa-krida* and eliciting the same level of audience participation. The play ended with Krishna emerging triumphant after killing the serpent Kaliya and some spectators rushed on stage to garland him.[5] The boy–actor, Vishnu Pagnis, excelled as Radha and was even compared to the immensely popular Gujarati stri-party Jaishankar Sundari. (Pagnis later turned to male roles and is today best remembered for his eponymous role in Prabhat's film *Sant Tukaram*.)

Lingering in the ever-popular world of mythology, Varerkar adhered in his second play *Sanjivani* (1910) to the main outline of the Kacha–Devayani myth (which Khadilkar was soon to modify for his *Vidyaharan*).[6] By Varerkar's own prefatory admission, this is a self-consciously didactic play about the ill effects of drink. His plan to write a more emphatic social play on the theme was dismissed by the Swadesh-hitachintak Mandali who were to pay for it, and the only alternative was a return to the mythic story, with some metaphorical embellishments. He later claimed to have avoided Khadilkar's fanciful touches and also reduced the number of songs (to only 60, as compared to Khadilkar's 100 or more), incurring the displeasure of the company's singer–actors. He also claims credit for introducing (along with Khadilkar) raga-based tunes from both the Hindustani and

[3] Bhargavram Vitthal Varerkar, *Kunja-vihari: A Mythological Play*, Mumbai: Navbharat Prakashan Sanstha, 1956 (1914).

[4] Varerkar, *Maza Nataki Sansar*, p. 110.

[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 170–71.

[6] Bhargavram Vitthal Varerkar, *Sanjivani*, Mumbai: Popular Book Depot, 1960.

Karnataka styles, in contrast to Kirloskar's fondness for traditional Maharashtrian tunes.[7]

Varerkar made a mark in the socio-political domain with *Hach Mulacha Bap* (This is the Bridegroom's Father, prose 1916, musical 1918) which contests dowry demands from poor and vulnerable parents of marriageable girls.[8] The immediate inspiration was provided by a case in Bengal – Snehalata's self-immolation in protest against dowry demands – and the message is underscored by the author in his preface.

The story centres on two elderly men and their children. Digambarpant is a lower-middle-class father, now reduced to poverty and indebtedness after marrying off six daughters. The seventh of his eight daughters, 16-year-old Yamuna is well-educated at home and able to retain her balance of mind and outward cheerfulness. A perfect foil to Digambarpant is his now-estranged one-time friend Raobahadur – a wealthy, greedy, pompous, and hypocritical lawyer. Despite reformist rhetoric, he attempts to extort a large dowry for his graduate son Vasant whose reciprocal childhood attachment to Yamuna is now revived. Unfortunately Vasant lacks the courage to oppose his father. Yamuna is subjected to the customary, humiliating scrutiny by potential grooms, such as the veterinary doctor Manohar, ridiculed as Dr Pashu ('animal') by Vasant and his friend Gulab. Through the complex strategies of Gulab and Manjiri (Vasant's outspoken sister), Raobahadur is compelled to permit Vasant's marriage to Yamuna, and their own marriage – and then made to realise the error of his ways. Raobahadur begs Digambarpant's forgiveness and all ends well.

This light and entertaining treatment of a serious and gloomy social problem is well balanced, with scattered puns, witticisms, and pithy lines. The characters are somewhat one-dimensional – greedy and callously hypocritical Raobahadur has his foil in poor but upright Digambarpant; progressive but somewhat cowardly Vasant is well-matched with sincere, affectionate, and conventional Yamuna, both being low-key; and the two string-pullers – courageous, reformist Gulab and effervescent, strong-willed Manjiri complement each

[7] Varerkar, 'Pannas Varshannantar' in *Sanjivani*, pp. 5–9.

[8] Bhargavram Vitthal Varerkar, *Hach Mulacha Bap: Gadya-Padyatmak Kautumbik Natak*, Mumbai: Anant Gopal Joshi, 1947 (1916/18).

other. Dr Pashu is a bumbling fool, mediocre but pompous about his worth as a bridegroom. Social critique is skilfully woven into the play, for example through Yamuna's clear-sighted pessimism about the fate of Brahmin marriageable girls on display in the marriage mart (Act I, Scene 3).

*Sannyashacha Sansar* (Family Life of a Renunciant, 1920) takes up what would now be identified as a 'Hindutva' issue – the reconversion of Hindus who had earlier left the fold (which Varerkar terms 'patita-parivartan', literally, the transformation of the fallen) as part of the nationalist agenda.[9] National (Hindu) integration is a dominant subtext. The play is dedicated to Swami Shraddhanand who advocated this message at the annual session of the Indian National Congress at Amritsar in December 1919. Despite its propagandistic orientation, idealism, and some cerebral dialogue, the play adheres to the sangit natak tradition.

The central character is Tyagaraj, the newly invested chief – titled 'Shri' – of a *Math* or religious centre which proudly perpetuates Shankaracharya's tradition. He is a college graduate with modern ideas which have antagonised the young but conservative Subramanya-shastri (from South India), the Math's chief officer who sees him as an unfair rival. But the elderly and progressive Bindumadhav-shastri (from Panjab) supports the new, adaptable, and emphatically nationalistic Shri. Shri's pronounced deviations from tradition are his visits to 'untouchables', allowing women to enter the Math, and even bringing in with him a Maharashtrian Christian convert, David Joshi.

David is desolated at being shunned by mainstream Hindu society, because his late father misguidedly converted to Christianity. Orphaned early, he has been raised by missionaries but now longs to re-enter the Hindu fold – and specifically be reinstated as a Brahmin. Shri supports such reconversion in the interests of nationalism. Soon Bindumadhav's two young daughters are introduced: the outspoken younger Dulari and the older Kishori who is heart-broken by the renunciation of Tyagaraj whom she loves, while being adored by David from afar. There is also the Reverend Gulelu (whose 'missionary

[9] Bhargavram Vitthal Varerkar, *Sannyashacha Sansar*, Mumbai: B.V. Varerkar, 1920. The play was first performed in September 1919 by Lalita-kaladarsha Natak Mandali at Victoria Theatre, Mumbai.

Marathi' speech is a source of great mirth) and his hypocritical friend Puttu Pandit, both from South India. When Dulari visits the Mission House to deliver a message from David, Gulelu is instantly smitten with her.

Ultimately Kishori begins to reciprocate David's feelings; winning this Brahmin girl as a bride facilitates David's conversion to Hinduism. A reformed Subramanya plans to settle down to family life with Dulari. Shri exults in his own 'family life' – the family life of a renunciant – which embraces all mankind.

Built around a liberal core, the play projects contradictory messages – preaching religious tolerance in the interests of an intolerant Hindu supremacy, advocacy of caste equality alongside Brahmin pre-eminence, supporting the integration of Indian linguistic–ethnic communities in coexistence with Maharashtrian chauvinism. Varerkar himself viewed the play as a reformist vehicle for reconverting Hindus, which was viewed with disfavour by the religious and social conservatives.[10] When specially invited to see a performance in Mumbai, B.G. Tilak made a generally favourable speech in one of the intervals, but admitted that the novel theme may not appeal to the public.[11] Khare-shastri shared the same premise, but enjoyed the play as a stirring emotional experience.[12]

By far the most famous and popular is Varerkar's *Satteche Gulam* (Rightful Slaves, 1922).[13] It draws inspiration from the triple boycott in the non-co-operation movement – including the boycott of British law courts – and critiques unscrupulous, hypocritical lawyers who defraud naïve litigants.[14] This is projected as Gandhian nationalism, alongside individual self-reliance in food and clothing. Its extraordinary success has been attributed to an astute reflection of the social and political reality.[15] The author's preface to the sixth edition claims that a 'play which conveys no political ideology cannot succeed on the Marathi stage'.

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[10] Varerkar, *Maza Nataki Sansar*, p. 397.

[11] Cited in Varerkar, *Maza Nataki Sansar*, p. 391.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 401.

[13] Bhargavram Vitthal Varerkar, *Satteche Gulam*, Mumbai: Bombay Book Depot, 1944 (1922). It was first performed by Lalita-kaladarsha Mandali in Mumbai in 1922.

[14] Gazetteers Department, *Maharashtra State Gazetteers*, p. 169.

[15] Desai, *Makhamalicha Padada*, pp. 60–61.

This again is a story of two families: the late Babasaheb's sons Heramb and Vaikunth, and nephew Kanhoba form one group, while Babasaheb's late friend's daughters Nalini and Kshama form the other. The curtain opens with a nandi invoking people to achieve the progress of the motherland in this modern age. The discussion then turns to Nalini's interrogation of mandatory marriage for girls; she toys with the idea of remaining single, unless she finds a true nationalist. Her choice is expected to settle on the handsome and successful lawyer Keropant, famous for his nationalistic public rhetoric, but will ultimately settle upon Vaikunth who, having acquired a law degree, has opted instead to cultivate a large farm at Chembur on Mumbai's outskirts. In his will Babasaheb has left his entire estate to his oldest and estranged son or the son's children or widow. If all these are deceased, the estate is to go to his dear friend's daughter Nalini.

Keropant renews his attentions to Nalini, but secretly attempts to contest the will through Heramb. A poor widow, Nurse Rewa, now appears; only Vaikunth knows her to be Babasaheb's widowed daughter-in-law. Nalini visits Vaikunth's farm and is impressed by both the beautiful surroundings and by Vaikunth's service to the motherland through self-reliance in food and clothing. In the fourth and final act, Keropant's evil nature is revealed, as is Rewa's true identity. Keropant finally sees the light and wants to mend his ways by giving up his crooked legal practice and utilising his legal expertise for the benefit of the poor. Nalini, dressed in a *khadi* sari made and gifted by Vaikunth, agrees to marry him. Rewa invites all her relatives to stay on in the house she has now inherited. The play ends with Vaikunth singing *Vande Mataram* as the Bharat-vakya.

The theme of slavery and power is unpacked through the play in various shades of meaning. 'A widow is a slave by right. Anyone may lord it over her! She possesses no power whatsoever, but everybody else has power over her', says Rewa (Act II, Scene 1). 'A slave like me who honours the power exerted by love naturally bows before that power', declares Vaikunth (Act II, Scene 2). 'Vaikunthrao has rescued us from the forced slavery of [mill work]', announces a peasant (Act III, Scene 3). The central theme of nationalism gradually deepens, mainly through Vaikunth's impassioned dialogue – and has led to the play being slotted either as 'political' or 'social'. But Varerkar himself has revealed (in his preface to the sixth edition)

the surveillance under which playwrights operated in the 1920s: each play was scrutinised by a censor and the collector of each district where it was performed. Such a restrictive milieu obviously precluded overtly political plays.

Within the mainstream Brahmanical theatre world, subaltern voices were first heard through Varerkar. His ideological commitment to the masses (*bahujan samaj*) led to the socialist advocacy of the mill workers' struggle against the capitalist mill owners in *Sonyacha Kalas* (Golden Spire, 1932). He based it on his then incomplete and partially published novel *Dhavta Dhota* (The Fly Shuttle).[16] The play is firmly rooted in Mumbai's economic, social, and spatial landscapes which it brings alive vividly – the Gujarati cotton-mill owners in their luxurious bungalows in the elite residential area of Malabar Hill, the Maharashtrian workers tightly packed in their one-room tenements in 'chawls' in the mill district of Parel, also known as 'Girangaon' or mill-town (and further divided into the majority immigrants from Konkan and those from the Deccan), and the shades of union politics (before trade unions were officially allowed) infiltrated by the mill owners' spies. The play's appeal to a wider audience would seem doubtful, but it was required reading for university courses in Mumbai, Madras, Osmania, and Ajmer, as the author mentions.[17]

The fast-paced narrative introduces the principal characters in the first scene: the elderly and highly respected labour leader Baba Shigwan, his son Dhondu, and Vithu Krishna, a mill-hand newly arrived from Konkan in search of work, who is befriended by Baba. To this circle also belongs Bijli, a fiercely self-reliant young widow who is forced to depend for support on her widowed aunt – a mill worker and prostitute. A surprising friendship springs up between her and Hansa – a young daughter of the Gujarati mill owner Madhavshet – who has strayed into the workers' locality. A subsequent encounter between the outspoken Bijli and Vithu hints at some mutual attraction.

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[16] The play was written for and first performed by Lalita-kaladarsha Natak Mandali in 1932. For a discussion of the novel, see Meera Kosambi (trans. and ed.), 'Introduction' in *Women Writing Gender: Marathi Fiction before Independence*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2012, pp. 33–34.

[17] Preface to the 1st edn reproduced in Bhargavram Vitthal Varerkar, *Sonyacha Kalas: Gadya-padyatmak Natak*, Mumbai: Balawant Pustak Bhandar, 1949 (1932).

**Plate 7.2:** Scene from *Sonyacha Kalas* with Krishna/Karsandas (Bapurao Pendharkar) in the centre, his Maharashtrian group on the left, and Gujarati group on the right, 1932.

At the upper end of the social spectrum is the Gujarati mill owner Karsandas (whose mill has a golden spire as its emblem) in his sprawling bungalow. His son, nicknamed Motabhai, is engaged to be married to Hansa. Invited by Hansa to visit her, Bijli is startled to see her fiance's photo – and the reason is soon explained. After her departure, this young man, Viththaldas Karsandas alias Motabhai arrives, just returned from a short holiday. That this is a differently attired Vithu Krishna is obvious to the audience, though not to the other characters, except Bijli.

Now unfolds the classic confrontation between capital and labour as Baba heads a workers' delegation to the bungalow of the arrogant Madhavdas to demand workers' rights. Predictably, the talks fail, but Hansa realises that her father is more interested in profits than in her. In the final act, Hansa and Viththal discuss the cynical nature of capitalism and its pillars. A workers' strike takes place at all the mills, with Vithu emerging as their new leader who later repents having disobeyed Baba's advice against calling a strike. He reveals his true identity to Baba who suggests the happy solution that Viththal should function as a combined mill owner and workers' leader. Viththal agrees. In an ambivalent mood, he proposes marriage to Bijli who rejects him, having dedicated her life to the workers' interests.

Viththal acquires ownership of both mills from his father and future father-in-law, and declares that every worker is an equal partner in running them. The linguistic–ethnic divide is bridged by Baba stating that Maharashtrian brains and Gujarati pockets would together gild the smoke-filled air of Mumbai with a golden spire. (Incidentally, the novel ends differently, with Viththal – a stranger in both the worlds he inhabits – leaving India to study the labour movement abroad.)

The play was one of the sources of inspiration for Mumbai's Mill Workers' Theatre or 'Kamgar Rangabhumi'.[18] This workers' theatre had a variety of origins, prominent among which was the public 10-day Ganesh festival introduced by Tilak in the 1890s as part of his nationalist agenda.[19] Visualised as a medium for political awakening, it spawned various performances from kirtans and lectures to *mela*s or troupes of mostly girls and boys, singing light as well as ideological songs. (Actors like Govindrao Tembe and Shanta Apte had debuted in melas.) While these were largely Brahmin developments, the jalsa was intended for the bahujan samaj. Modelled partly on the tamasha but conveying a clearly social and political message, it was deployed with considerable effect by Jotirao Phule and later Babasaheb Ambedkar in their protest against caste inequality. While all these troupes toured throughout Maharashtra, the workers' theatre was confined to Mumbai, the home of mill workers. It was run by amateur clubs, starting in about 1915 and continuing well beyond Independence, and was elastic enough to blend pure entertainment and religious touches like dashavatar popular in the Konkan home of most of the mill-hands, with social and political ideology.

Varerkar also succumbed to Maharashtra's abiding fascination with the Subhadra–Arjun love story and produced the third famous Marathi musical (after Kirloskar and Khadilkar) on the theme within seven decades, under the title *Sannyashache Lagna* (A Renunciant's Marriage, 1945).[20] Varerkar projects his Arjun as a dancer–hero, a

[18] Shelke, 'Natak', p. 418.

[19] This description of the workers' theatre is derived from Rameshchandra Patkar, *Adhunik Shahiri ani Kamgar Rangabhumi*, Kolhapur: Comrade Govind Pansare Amrit Mahotsav Samiti, 2009.

[20] Bhargavram Vitthal Varerkar, *Sannyashache Lagna: Pauranik Natak*, Mumbai: B.D. Satoskar, 1945, pp. 5–8. The play was first performed at the Royal Opera House, Mumbai, in March 1945. The theatre, built in 1925 also

disciple of the celestial entertainer Urvashi. The technical innovation here is the unity of time and place – the action unfolds during a single day (through three one-scene acts) in the same chamber in the royal palace at Dwaraka.

If Kirloskar made Krishna the omnipotent string-puller, Varerkar makes Rukmini author a conspiracy to promote the marriage of Subhadra and Arjun – but keeping intact both mystery and disguise. An emphatically feminist punchline from Subhadra at the end spells out her message to young girls: 'If the family elders place obstacles in their love, the girls of the next generation should behave like Subhadra – isn't that so, Vahini?' The last rhetorical question is directed at Rukmini who had also entered into a love marriage, by urging Krishna to abduct her.

The play appeared during a period of decline for the theatre. A tame shadow of Kirloskar's masterpiece, it is generally entertaining but lacks novelty except for group dances in which women participate – this being a time when women performed routinely on stage.

## Political Preoccupations: Khare-shastri, 'Vir' Joshi, Savarkar

Famous as a historian of the Maratha period and well-versed in classical Sanskrit literature, Vasudevshastri Khare (*c.* 1859–1924) was also a dramatist.[21] At an early age he composed short musical plays on mythological themes for the annual festivities of his town. While working as a school teacher, he won the drama competition held by Rajaram College of Kolhapur – on the occasion of the coronation of Shahu Maharaj – with his *Gunotkarsha* (The Rise of Virtue, 1884). It is an imaginary story against the backdrop of the ideological conflict between Chhatrapati Shivaji, founder of the Maratha kingdom resisting Mughal power in the Deccan, and his son Sambhaji who joined the Mughals in pursuit of political power. The play became an

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functioned as a cinema hall since 1935; Gupt, *The Parsi Theatre*, pp. 38–39. Plays were then performed only on Sunday mornings. (In the early 1950s I have seen Prithviraj Kapur's *Deewar*, *Gaddar*, and *Pathan* performed here on Sunday mornings.)

[21] M.S. Kanade, *Kalche Natakakar*, Pune: Joshi ani Lokhande Prakashan, 1967, pp. 63–98.

instant success. But Khare entered the theatre arena only three decades later with a cluster of six plays. His two plays for Maharashtra Natak Mandali included *Shiva-sambhav* (The Birth of Shivaji, 1919) which earned high popularity. He also wrote two plays for Tembe's Shivraj Sangit Mandali and two for Balwant Sangit Mandali, including *Ugra-mangal* (1922) which became immensely successful.

*Shiva-sambhav* deals with the period just before Shivaji's birth and portrays the aspirations of his father Shahaji (played initially by Keshavrao Date) to free Maharashtra from Muslim rule; it was surprisingly Khare's only truly historical play. It also depicts Shahaji's interaction with Jijabai (played by Vishnupant Aundhkar) and an unpatriotic sardar, Lakhuji Jadhavrao. An (unsuccessful) defamation suit filed by Jadhavrao's descendants was an understandable deterrent to Khare's further historical drama. The play's last scene showing the cradle of infant Shivaji became legendary. When Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur saw the play, he at once stood up to reverently salute his illustrious ancestor; this spontaneous reaction was displayed also by the descendants of some Maratha sardars of Gwalior. The line between theatre and reality was blurred yet again. Such was the patriotic fervour aroused by the play that it was performed at Pune on 15 August 1947 and again in 1960 on Shivajiraje's birth anniversary on the eve of the formation of Maharashtra State.

In the preface to *Ugra-mangal*, Khare takes pains to point out that although the plot is imaginary, a few scenes are based on historical incidents.[22] This justification ultimately has little relevance because the timeframe remains indeterminate – kings, forts and battles take us into the past, but Act II ends on a short quote from Lokamanya Tilak, and elsewhere there is mention of 'satyagraha'.

The title is not easy to translate: it refers mainly to 'Mangal', the planet Mars which can cause havoc if wrongly positioned in a person's horoscope according to Hindu astrology. Such an eventuality poses a threat to the life of Lakshmansing, king of Ratanpur, as foretold by the court astrologer to queen Padmavati. Her stratagem to avert the disaster is to engage the king in a variety of entertainment for over a month, until the fatal day has passed. But meanwhile the inimical king Bhimsing of Manikdurg dispatches his son Hirasing with a large force against Ratanpur. Lakshmansing is warned of the disaster, defeats

[22] Vasudev Vaman Khare, *Sangit Ugra-mangal Natak*, Miraj: V.V. Khare, 1923.

Hirasing in battle, but is captured by deceit while celebrating his victory and taken to Manikdurg. The news impels Padmavati to lead the remaining forces against the enemy. While the army lays siege to the fort, Padmavati assumes the guise of the entertainer Bijli-jan, sings and dances for pleasure-loving Hirasing, and then captures him with the help of her soldiers posing as musicians. The whole party proceeds against Manikdurg where Lakshmansing is about to be killed. Meanwhile this is averted by Bhimsing's daughter Durgavati, a childhood friend of Padmavati and a figure who weaves in and out of the story. Her attempt to forge peace between the warring factions involves forcing Lakshmansing to marry her in order to save his life. Durgavati afterwards plans to end her own life rather than betray her friend. But Padmavati appears on the scene and happily accepts her as a co-wife, and all ends well. The dreadful (*ugra*) dagger which would have killed either Lakshmansing or Bhimsing leads to a happy, auspicious (*mangal*) ending: this is the other interpretation to which the title is amenable.

As per the accepted convention, there is a humorous sub-plot involving the astrologer's daughter and her lover who dupes the father by dressing up as a woman. The play was made famous by Dinanath as Padmavati: as Bijli he sang a song in the Panjabi style, followed by a Kathak dance.

Vamanrao Joshi earned the title 'Vir' (brave) through the militant nationalist rhetoric which he brought to the stage.[23] A staunch Tilakite and a powerful orator, he was persuaded by the actor Keshavrao Bhosale to write a play for him. Over a period of 20 years he wrote five plays – one was unacted and published posthumously – all set in imaginary kingdoms which form the backdrop for a conflict between legitimate political power (at times backed by religious authority) and ambitious usurpers. The transfer of his militancy to the stage makes the dialogue sound like an ideological disputation, with the addition of dire threats, revenge, professions of political allegiance and then betrayal – both in word and gory action.

His first and extremely successful play, *Rakshasi Mahattvakanksha* (Demonic Ambition, 1914), with the chief female role played by

[23] Kanade, *Kalche Natakakar*, pp. 1–62.

Keshavrao Bhosale, was launched in Mumbai by Lalita-kaladarsha Company which earned both fame and profit from it. The author acknowledges in the preface that he drew inspiration from the Parsi Urdu play *Khubsurat Bala* which had loyalty as the central theme, and then wove around it the competition of demonic versus godly ambition.[24] The Parsi influence is reflected also in a series of gory encounters as well as massive sets and backdrops portraying castles and royal courts.

In this unnecessarily prolonged narrative (with seven acts totalling 48 scenes), the central figure is the evil Madalasa who has killed first her husband, then her brother King Vikramaditya, and also made an attempt on the latter's son Chandrashekhar, in order to usurp the throne. But she is deterred by the loyal Vikrant who describes her in 'Rana Bhimdev' style (explained later) as:

> [A] cruel and extremely vile demoness who, overcome by sexual passion, killed with her own hands her husband – who was worthy of reverence as her god – while he slept trustingly with his head on her lap; who ran after the mirage of imperial power and had her generous brother poisoned; who has now smeared her seemingly well-rounded and sleek hands with the blood of her young, tender, orphaned nephew; and who is [thus] ready to top with the spire of infanticide the temple of fratricide erected on the foundation of her husband's murder (Act I, Scene 1).

The play advances the convoluted action in the same style of dialogue. The prince has been saved and taken to the trusted sardar Durjay who, however, turns traitor when threatened with death and champions Madalasa. Unscrupulous Madalasa is adept at all forms of intrigue and even tries to seduce male opponents to serve her ambition. Her villainy is underscored by the nobility of all the other female characters whose tenderness and femininity is, however, matched by their bravery and fighting skills. Durjay's patriotic wife Sarojini repudiates him to the extent of breaking off her mangalsutra and wiping the kunku off her forehead. Meanwhile Vikrant's patriotic wife Devangana has been captured by Madalasa, made to see her own little son decapitated, is tortured in prison (off-stage), and mauled by wild animals (on-stage). The animals are chased away by

[24] Vaman Gopal (Vir) Joshi, *Sangit Rakshasi Mahattvakanksha*, Ratnagiri: V.G. Joshi, 1916 (1914).

young and saintly Mrinalini and her followers. Devangana succumbs to her mortal wounds after tearing off the blood-stained padar of her sari to serve as a royal banner for Chandrashekhar. Against the backdrop of on-stage battle scenes, torture, and treachery, Mrinalini (who fights bravely) falls in love with Vikrant who, however, is in perpetual mourning for his wife and treats her like a daughter. In the end Madalasa is thoroughly defeated though not killed, but her chief supporter Durjay (to whom she has made a false promise of marriage) is. Sarojini and Mrinalini decide to withdraw from worldly life and dedicate themselves to spiritual concerns; Vikrant promises to join them later. Chandrashekhar is invested as king but promises to rule in the name and under the banner of Devangana whose sacrifice has enabled his eventual success.

*Rana-dundubhi* (The Battle Trumpet, 1927) was written for Balwant Company with the female protagonist played by Dinanath.[25] Its overtly patriotic and anti-colonial songs sing the glories of political freedom. At Independence in 1947, some scenes were broadcast by All India Radio's Mumbai centre.

The play's imaginary–historical plot is a peg to hang passionate freedom-loving rhetoric. It revolves around four main characters – Kandarp (the effete king of Kadamb), Saudamini (his ambitious mistress), Tejaswini (a fiery and loyal citizen earlier betrothed to Kandarp), and Yuvaraj (the prince of the Matangas with imperial plans to annex Kadamb). Pleasure-loving Kandarp is enjoying himself in the company of Saudamini and his cronies with wine, music, and dance on the eve of signing a treaty with Yuvaraj. The treaty would supposedly make Kandarp offer his kingdom to Yuvaraj as a gesture of honour, and have it returned to him equally honourably. This would free Kandarp from administrative–military responsibilities to devote himself to enjoyment of his wealth and privileges. Tejaswini's passionate protest and planned rebellion – backed by breaking off their betrothal – sways Kandarp in the direction of saving his kingdom and the honour of his forefathers. In fact his hardly-believable vacillation (at the behest of Saudamini and Tejaswini) continues throughout the play.

The meaningless chatter of two courtiers who are feckless and treacherous is supposed to provide humour as is the rigid disciplinarian

[25] Vaman Gopal (Vir) Joshi, *Sangit Rana-dundubhi Natak*, Pune: Shri Saraswati Mandal, 1930.

army chief who lacks simple common sense. Saudamini pursues her hidden agenda of marrying Yuvaraj and also succeeding to the throne of Kadamb, and along with the disloyal courtiers, attempts to deliver Kandarp to Yuvaraj. But Tejaswini leads a rebellion of loyal citizens with fiery rhetoric. (Her speech in self-defence in the court of law, which valorises political freedom, continues for five pages with brief interjections in Act IV, Scene 2, and must have resonated with the famous speeches of contemporary Indian political leaders.) Kandarp also puts up a last-minute fight and is fatally wounded by Yuvaraj. His life hangs in the balance with Tejaswini trying to revive him, as the final curtain comes down.

Joshi's plays escaped the charge of sedition through a strategy outlined by Khadilkar. The latter's mythological *Kichak-vadh* was banned for instigating the murder of a state official, but his historical *Bhaubandaki* was saved because it supported royal power. Joshi used the same agenda through his imaginary plots. Extremist politics and militant personalities were the key to his success, aided by intense emotions and speedy events. He made the stage the new battleground for the nationalist movement. But like Khadilkar he turned Gandhian after Tilak's death and people felt the change in his rhetorical style: gone was the aggressive passion of his earlier speeches.[26]

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Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883–1966) is best-known as a revolutionary political leader prominent on the national scene and a champion of 'Hindutva', a term he coined. He was also a famous orator and writer of prose, poetry, and drama: his massive output fills 10 thick volumes of collected works. Arguably his best-known work is *The Indian War of Independence* about the uprising of 1857. Savarkar studied law in England and was arrested there in 1910 for his terrorist leanings. While being deported by sea to India, he attempted to escape through a porthole at Marseilles, was caught by the French authorities, and handed to the British. He was then sentenced to two life terms totalling 50 years and sent to solitary confinement in the Cellular Jail in Andaman. In 1921 he was conditionally released, taken to Ratnagiri Jail, and later kept under house arrest in Ratnagiri. During these years at Ratnagiri he wrote three musical plays to promote his

[26] Chapekar, *Smriti-dhan*, p. 143.

Hindutva agenda. He was president of the Hindu Mahasabha from 1937 to 1943 and chaired the Marathi Sahitya Sammelan in 1938.

Savarkar's first play *Sangit Uhshaap* (Release from a Curse, 1927) is set in the 14th century during the lifetime of the Varkari Sant Chokha Mela – the only Dalit (of Mahar origin) in the core group of Varkari saints.[27] Chokha here figures anachronistically as an Ambedkar-like figure who encourages Dalits to acquire an education, improve their health and hygiene, and adopt a refined lifestyle. (This echoes the slogan 'Educate yourselves, unite, and struggle' by Ambedkar whom Savarkar supported.) Influenced by this advice are young Shankar and Kamalini of the Mahar community who hope to marry soon and are on their way to Pandharpur for a darshan of Chokha. Although inured to the routine oppression of Dalits, both are devastated by the injustice meted out to Chokha who refuses to rebel and endures everything on the strength of his deep Hindu faith. The young pair is waylaid by Muslims; Kamalini is abducted and taken to a brothel where she is protected by its motherly owner. Shankar is lured into accepting Islam with a false report of Kamalini's conversion and by hollow promises of social equality. He finally meets Kamalini only when she is severely wounded while protecting herself from molestation by a Muslim officer. With her dying breath she berates Shankar for his conversion; he kills himself just as she dies. Meanwhile, the faith of Chokha and his wife Soyara is rewarded by an epiphany in which Krishna (not Viththal of Pandharpur whom Varkaris worship) manifests himself and blesses them.

The social and political message is clear in some ways: the blot of untouchability has to be erased in order to strengthen Hindu unity. Savarkar's opposition to Gandhi is also clear through the ridicule meted out to a character called Satyavan whose obsession with the truth at times leads to untold harm, as when he reveals Kamalini's hiding place to her pursuers.

The idiom of the musical play must have seemed the obvious choice for Savarkar, though its occasional artificiality can hardly be overlooked: the tired and thirsty Kamalini – barely able to walk or talk, and refused water by caste Hindus – sings song after song. Three of Chokha's original poems are used in the play (and another is sung by Soyara in a modified form); but 15 of the songs allotted to

[27] V.D. Savarkar, *Sangit Uhshaap* in *Samagra Savarkar Vangmaya*, Khanda 7, Pune: Maharashtra Prantik Hindusabha, 1965, pp. 419–538.

him are composed by Savarkar.[28] Equally strange is the total lack of polyphony or 'a plurality of modes of expressions, registers and styles'[29]: Sanskritised Marathi speech is used by all the characters – Brahmins, Marathas, Mahars, and Muslims.

Interestingly, a character in the prologue talks about the deception involved in enacting a play:

> The harmfulness of a play does not depend on whether the plot is political or not. It is the art of drama that is by its nature a storehouse of untruth, like a prostitute. Concealing one's true nature and striving to be someone else – is this not simple deception? Moreover, there is also the pretence of transformation, and even a sex change! One does not merely pretend, but even vows to be and acts as that character. A good actor is considered to be he who can immerse himself in his role for the necessary duration and totally forget himself . . . An actor is [at times] a man during the day and a woman in the evening – so convincingly that thousands are unable to tell whether the role-player is actually a man or a woman.

Sutradhar responds: 'I find your definition of Truth – that verbal truth is the only truth – dubious. I feel that the dramatic art is a very useful medium to steer society towards a beneficial goal' (Act I, Scene 1).

The best-known of Savarkar's plays is *Sangit Sannyasta Khadga* (A Sword Renounced, 1931).[30] Also historical, it is set in the time of the Buddha who preaches non-violence to the army chief of the Shakyas, Vikramsinh, inspiring him to lay down his famous sword. About forty years later, his son Vallabh becomes the Shakyan army chief; when he does battle against the Kosalas, his wife Sulochana also joins the Shakya forces in male dress. Vikram finally realises that his family and state have come to grief at the hands of the Kosalas as a result of his pacifism. In a reversal and subversion of the Buddha's message, he insists: 'Compassion alone cannot control cruelty, sympathy alone cannot control anger, non-violence alone cannot control violence, religious philosophy alone cannot control arms – not always

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[28] For Chokha Mela's verses, see Nana-maharaj Sakhare (comp.), *Shri Sant-gatha*, Pune: Varada, 1994 (1990), pp. 147–49.

[29] Alessandra Riccardi, *Translation Studies: Perspectives on an Emerging Discipline*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 7.

[30] V.D. Savarkar, *Sangit Sannyasta Khadga* in *Samagra Savarkar Vangmaya,* Khanda 7, pp. 539–640.

and not everywhere. They cannot conquer and destroy these'. And further: 'Unfortunate is the nation which regards the feeble life of renunciation as the highest dharma!' (Act II, Scene 6). Thus 40 years after renouncing his sword, Vikramsinh is compelled to wield it again even as the Buddha insists hollowly on the efficacy of non-violence. The Buddha comes across as an ambivalent fence-sitter who expounds his pacifism through lengthy dialogues. The intended parallel with Gandhi hardly needs to be stressed.

However, the play ends with Dharma (Religion or Moral Duty) personified extolling the Buddha as a renunciant but lauding *karma-yoga* or action as far superior. The ultimate spiritual authority of the Hindus thus blesses militancy in justifiable causes – such as defending the motherland against foreign invasion.

*Sangit Uttar-kriya* (literally Funerary Rites, but here interpreted also as 'Action in the North', 1933) deals with the aftermath of the Maratha defeat at Panipat in 1761.[31] The vast narrative sweep is more suited to fiction than drama: spatially it travels from the Peshwa's palace in Pune to a battlefield in North India; the characters who inhabit it range from Peshwa Madhavrao the Elder, his sardars, and soldiers (including two cowardly Brahmins compelled to join the troops, and expected to provide humour) to Muslim army chiefs, and further to an East India Company official.

Weaving in and out of the narrative is the character of Madwoman ('Vedi') who manages to gain access to the Peshwa at the outset and reveals the method in her madness by reminding him of his duty to avenge the Maratha defeat and perform the funerary rites for his kinsmen presumed to have died in battle. She is crazed with grief because both she and her married daughter had accompanied the Peshwa ladies to Panipat, and been captured and ravaged by the Muslims. Simultaneously a living woman and a ghost of the gory past, this is a powerful and haunting character. Her words impel Madhavrao to a retaliatory campaign in the North. Crucial to its success is Yashwantrao whose astonishing adventures include capture by the Muslims at Panipat, their selling him as a slave to a compassionate French army officer, his visit to Europe and even America, his return to French Pondicherry, and now an honourable commission in the Peshwa's army. With an iron will he leaves his lovely bride

[31] V.D. Savarkar, *Sangit Uttar-kriya* in *ibid.*, pp. 641–724.

(the younger sister of his beloved first wife who had died at Panipat) – but she decides to follow him in a male guise.

Embedded within this larger sweep is the story of a Muslim officer whose wife, originally part of the Maratha forces, has been forcibly converted to Islam. She is later discovered to be Madwoman's older daughter who was presumed dead; now she really dies in a fight. But moments earlier, Madwoman is briefly united with her and the younger daughter disguised as a male.

Having wiped out the stigma of defeat and reinstated Maratha honour, the Peshwa is blessed in a Bharata-vakya sung by the ghosts of his dead kinsmen.

The play is thus a strange combination of history, fantasy, and spectacle. The actual battle scenes – clashes of large troops, swordfights, canon-fire, soldiers standing on a bastion – are clearly not meant for the stage. But the conventions of musical drama are faithfully observed.

## 'Lowbrow' Entertainment

Chronologically preceding all these dramatists but operating in a very different mode were Shirwalkar and Patankar whose target audience was the lower class, especially the mill workers of Mumbai.

V.R. Shirwalkar of Shahunagar-vasi Mandali was best-known for his three derivative historical plays – *Rana Bhimdev* (1892), *Panipatcha Mukabla* (The Conflict at Panipat, 1893), and *Panna-ratna, arthat Divya Raj-nishtha* (Panna the Gem, or Sublime Allegiance, 1912) – in addition to plays based on the lives of saints, such as Tukaram, Eknath, and Namdev.[32]

Shirwalkar shows a strong influence of the Parsi Urdu theatre through exaggerated and fantastic events that thrilled the audiences, impassioned and somewhat artificial dialogue, and a heavy sprinkling of Urdu, even entire scenes in Urdu – not because the plot demanded it, but because the audiences enjoyed the sound of it. He (and some of his contemporaries) adapted foreign plays and created for them a seemingly Indian background through an imaginary context in which Rajputs stood for Marathas. This was accepted as 'historical' by a tacit agreement among the readers, spectators and the writer, as a contemporary critic remarked.[33]

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[32] Kanade, *Kalche Natakakar*, pp. 128–48.

[33] Cited in Kale, 'Natya-vangmaya', p. 23.

*Rana Bhimdev* was a musical adaptation of Sheridan's *Pizarro* (itself a free adaptation of Kotzebue's German *Die Spanier in Peru*, a play with extravagant heroics). But Shirwalkar tried to pass it off as an original work, demanded by the paucity of such plays in Marathi. Further, 'although the main objective of a play is to entertain . . . we would understand our ancestors better and respect them more if entertainment is accompanied by a historical depiction and a display of their loyalty, generosity, bravery, patriotism, etc., when the occasion demands it'.[34]

The most popular soliloquy from the play, declaimed with appropriate histrionics by the immensely popular prose actor Ganpatrao Joshi, was Bhimdev's expression of self-loathing at his inability to resist the enemy, in his effort to spur himself and others to valiant action:

> Ye gods in heaven, has this lament of ours, of Rajputs, not yet pierced through the gates of Heaven and fallen upon your ears? Alas, what a pathetic state we are reduced to! Our ancestors in heaven – who never in their entire life allowed their pure reputation to be sullied by defeat, who spread their fame all around through valorous deeds, who regarded service to the country as their prime duty, whose humaneness meant sparing the lives of those who had surrendered in battle, whose creed was to wield the sword on the battlefield and vanquish the enemy, whose wedded wife was the sword shining in their hand, whose sacred vow was to punish evildoers and bring happiness to the inhabitants of the land of Bharat – these our ancestors have surely created a terrible commotion in heaven!!! . . . Shame on you, you impotent men! . . . Go and cleave the hands of the enemy – the hands which dispatched thousands of your countrymen from this mortal world, and which are trying to win over your mother, the Aryan land . . . – and throw them to the vultures! Let the banner of valour flutter on your breast! Think upon the bravery of your ancestors! Do dreadful battle that will dispel the clouds which now conceal their feats though they once shone like the sun! Carry in your hand the sword that now hangs at your waist, and drench the battlefield in the blood of your enemy! Revenge! Revenge!! Revenge!!![35]

This impassioned soliloquy – along with similar ones – became so popular that many knew it by heart, and recited it at public functions with great enthusiasm. (The same status was enjoyed in the more

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 24.
[35] *Ibid.*, pp. 25–26.

recent past by Gabbar Singh's monologue from Bollywood's *Sholay*.) This 'Rana Bhimdev' style of acting, as it is still known, became vastly popular. But implicit in such soliloquies and dialogues was also a potentially explosive political message that has not been adequately noted by theatre historians. This political dimension was to become more pronounced a few years later through Khadilkar's plays.

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Shirwalkar's contemporary, Madhavrao Patankar (1862–1916) functioned very successfully from about 1880 to 1910 in various capacities: as a playwright, handsome actor, and efficient founder–manager of a theatre company.[36] Born in a priestly Brahmin family of a small Konkan town, he received a Sanskrit education at home and some formal schooling. He went to Mumbai in about 1882 to attend high school, but was sidetracked by the ubiquitous theatre entertainment. He first established an amateur theatre group and then the professional Patankar Sangit Natak Mandali in 1884. Having initially performed Kirloskar's plays (which were not copyrighted), he ventured to perform one of Deval's plays – which were copyrighted – and was heavily penalised. This compelled him to write his own plays.

Patankar toured all over Maharashtra, and also received unexpected and generous patronage from the Chief of Gwalior. But his most loyal patronage came from the ordinary theatre-goers – mostly mill workers – of Mumbai. Of his roughly 25 plays, by far the most popular was *Vikram-Shashikala* – an imaginary story of the romance, marriage, and separation of a king and a poor Brahmin girl. An explicitly erotic duet from the play – hummed by most lowbrow theatre-goers of Mumbai – incurred the wrath of many in the theatre world, especially playwright S.K. Kolhatkar who labelled this and Patankar's other plays 'slightly improved tamashas'. However, Varerkar credits Patankar with having actually drawn the masses away from vulgar tamashas towards a theatre with a literary base.[37]

Along with imaginary themes, Patankar essayed mythological themes, lives of Maharashtrian saints, and even a Hindi and a Hindi–Gujarati play. He also wrote an effective political play, *Bhasmasur*, disguised as a mythological story but critiquing Curzon's rule. It was banned along with Khadilkar's *Kichak-vadh*.

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[36] Kanade, *Kalche Natakakar*, pp. 99–127.

[37] Varerkar, *Maza Nataki Sansar*, p. 58.

Patankar's consistent objective was to convey some moral truth through the kind of dialogue and musical entertainment easily appreciated by the common man. His characters were simple and identifiable as good and evil locked in conflict: the good suffered but ultimately triumphed; the evil succeeded temporarily but came to a bad end and repented. Poetic justice prevailed. Patankar's tunes showed a wide variety – from the classical ragas to Marathi poetic metres, lavanis, Hindi *bhajan*s, and tunes from Parsi plays. K.N. Kale maintains that the stiff opposition Patankar encountered was essentially class-based and rooted in his catering to the low-brow-audiences.[38]

## Other Strands

N.C. Kelkar (1872–1947) was yet another famous political figure to enter the theatre arena. This college graduate and lawyer was invited by B.G. Tilak to join the editorial board of *Kesari* and *The Mahratta*, and worked in this capacity for many years. His contribution to the novel, poetry, drama, biography (of Tilak), autobiography, history, philosophy, and the social sciences earned him the title of *sahitya-samrat* (an emperor of literature). The best-known of his 10 plays, *Totayache Banda* (The Impostor's Insurgency, 1912), deals with the historical episode of a man posing as Sadashivrao – younger brother of Peshwa Nanasaheb and uncle of Madhavrao the Elder – who was presumed slain during the battle of Panipat in 1761.[39]

The prose play, set in 1776, 15 years after the battle, focuses on two main historical characters – Nana Phadnis who tries desperately to hold together the Peshwai during Sawai Madhavrao's minority, and Parvatibai who refuses to believe that her husband Sadashivrao is dead and grieves for him night and day. About this time, a man named Sukhanidhan from Kanauj, imprisoned in Ratnagiri fort for 12 years for pretending to be Sadashivrao, is freed through the strategy of his mentor Daulatgir who had first spotted the resemblance between the two. He is joined by some Maratha sardars but is stopped on his march to Pune by the forces sent by Phadnis.

Meanwhile, Parvatibai is joined by Amala, a woman from North India, searching for her missing husband. She provides the clinching proof that the pretender is her husband and is strangled by him as

[38] Kale, 'Natya-vangmaya', pp. 32–33.

[39] N.C. Kelkar, *Totayache Banda*, Pune: S.R. Sardesai, 1931 (1912).

a result. Her story has already been corroborated by Haibati, a servant who has seen Sadashivrao succumb to a vicious attack at Panipat and who has reached home after many years. Meanwhile, Haibati's wife Vithai has pretended to believe that her husband is still alive, but engaged in adulterous relationships – thus highlighting Parvatibai's paativratya by contrast.

A straightforward historical narrative with the clearcut objective of reinstating Phadnis and valorising Parvatibai's wifely devotion, the play lacks suspense which could have been added by leaving the audience in doubt until the end about the impostor's true identity.

V.C. alias Vishram Bedekar (1906–1998) is unique in having successfully straddled the fields of literature, theatre, and cinema. Counted among his landmark literary creations is his solitary play *Sangit Brahmakumari* (1933) which remains the earliest explicit, modern articulation of the problems of married life and of gendered sexual morality, through the medium of the well-known mythic story of Ahalya (also Ahilya), wife of Sage Gautam, seduced by Indra, king of the gods.[40]

The play opens with the wealthy Indra lusting after the beautiful Ahalya and proposing to marry her, with the blessings of her father Brahmadev (the Creator), much to the dismay of Indra's wife. Ahalya spurns his overtures and shyly indicates her preference for the sage Gautam who leads an austere life. Brahmadev allows her to go with him to his ashram in the Himalayas on condition that they marry after a week, unless she changes her mind. She is to be accompanied by Tara, wife of the elderly sage Brihaspati whom she has come to despise while secretly hankering after the young and brilliant moon-god, Chandra. This mismatched marriage is paralleled by another between an aged and poor man doting on his young and frustrated wife. With the help of this man Indra plans his revenge, promising him untold riches to win his wife's love. Complicit in the plan are also Chandra and Madan (Cupid); all three live in Gautam's ashram in disguise to spy on him.

[40] Vishram Bedekar, *Sangit Brahmakumari*, Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1986 (1933). The play has 31 songs and was first performed by Balwant Sangit Mandali at Sangli in 1933, with Dinanath playing Gautam.

When on the eighth day Gautam and Ahalya are married and engaged in a romantic conversation, she asks him to fulfil her desire to live in a luxurious pleasure chamber. He creates it on the strength of his spiritual powers and teases her that he might visit her there as a totally transformed man. Just then news is brought that Tara has been abducted a short distance away and Gautam rushes to the rescue. Indra now steals in and tried to convince Ahalya that he is indeed the 'transformed' Gautam, recalling their earlier conversation (reported to him by his spies) to overcome her suspicion and resistance. Gautam enters just as he embraces and kisses her, and is enraged to see his wife 'violated' even before their marriage is consummated.

Meanwhile Tara has been incarcerated by Chandra but refuses to submit to him; despite her repugnance for her husband, she has been strongly conditioned by the notion of paativratya. With the entry of Brihaspati, Tara clearly articulates her thoughts on the nature of marriage, man–woman relationship, and gendered double standards of morality. So explosive was the rebellious Tara's explication (Act II, Scene 3) regarded in 1933 that the censor allowed the play to be performed only after omitting the scene. She objects not to the institution of marriage, but to enforced marriage – which is why she will not accompany her husband home: 'I may be your wife, but I am also a woman with an independent mind, not a cow that will follow her owner to the cowshed hoping for hay. If a man derives pleasure from gazing at a pretty woman, so is a woman alive to the ugliness of a man'. Having inwardly accepted Chandra as her husband, she has realised that 'the contentment found in voluntarily becoming a slave to a lover cannot be found in the freedom of a shrew who lords it over her husband merely with the power of her eyes'. The news of Ahalya faced with danger arrives just then and Tara rushes to her aid.

In the last one-scene act, Gautam confronts Indra and inflicts upon him the curse that he will forever be known as the ultimate adulterer. Ahalya declares that she will voluntarily leave her husband to engage in religious austerities to cleanse herself of her 'sin' and return to him as a chaste woman. He assures her that God Himself will uplift her and she will be revered as the greatest of pativratas.[41] She and Tara, the 'fallen women', go on the same quest in the wilderness, happy

[41] The five iconic pativratas of mythology are Ahalya, Draupadi, Sita, Tara (a different one), and Mandodari.

in their conviction of being able to earn their husbands' love – the ultimate salvation for a woman.

The drama critic Shubhada Shelke sees the play as structurally located at the intersection of three disparate streams.[42] Tara's feminist self-awareness and society's indifference to women's well-being reflect the consciousness of Ibsen's Nora and Hedda Gabler; the drama's progression in an ascending order towards a climax and then to the final denouement shows the influence of Shakespeare; and the conventions guiding the divisions of acts and scene, soliloquies, and a happy ending are inherited from Sanskrit dramaturgy. Shelke's surprising assumption of a happy ending is questionable: Tara's radical rebellion on behalf of all women surrenders to Ahalya's conservative valorisation of paativratya and Bedekar's expose peters out into intense patriarchalism.

[42] Shelke, 'Natak', pp. 396–97.

# Section III
## Theatrescapes

**Plate 8.1:** Bal Gandharva as Rukmini (right) in *Svayamvar*, c. 1915.

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# 8

# Major Theatre Companies

The mystique of individual actors and theatre companies was inevitable in a society which was impacted far more – and sometimes only – by the staging of a play than its text. The visits of touring companies were awaited like festive occasions, their reflected glory being a source of gratification. Theatre lore was treasured and consumed almost as eagerly as actual performances. The companies which possessed 'stars' – usually singers, but also non-singers known for their declamations, or comedians – achieved an iconic status.

## Kirloskar Company after Kirloskar

Kirloskar Company's hegemonic status long survived the founder's unexpected death, continuing to claim in the theatrical arena the same respect and affinity from Maharashtrians that Tilak's *Kesari* did in the political arena.[1] Homage was paid to his photo (placed near the Shiva image) at the company's lodgings before embarking on any important venture; in fact this deification of Kirloskar through his photo was seen in later musical companies as well. Kirloskar Company was run efficiently and profitably along established lines, with Bhaurao Kolhatkar and Moroba Wagholikar as joint proprietors enjoying mutual trust and affection. The company's earnings in Mumbai were about Rs 1,300 a week, somewhat less in Pune, and about Rs 1,000 in other towns.[2] Before 1900, a month's annual leave was granted to actors because they did not bring their families with them.[3]

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[1] Govind S. Tembe, *Maza Jivan-vihar*, Kolhapur: Bharat Book Stall, 1948, p. 153.

[2] Bodas, *Majhi Bhumika*, pp. 47–48.

[3] *Ibid.*

In 1897 Bhaurao switched partly to male roles at about the age of 30 when he saw his face losing the delicacy essential for a female role, and played male roles equally effectively. His voice could express both feminine softness and masculine depth and energy.[4] At this juncture Moroba chose to retire, not wanting to work opposite youngsters. A new contract was drawn up (granting Moroba a pension of one anna or one-sixteenth of a rupee from the earnings) and placed before Kirloskar's photo. Then the two erstwhile partners signed the document in a fraught moment and Moroba immediately left for good.[5] Bhaurao died in 1901 of dropsy after suffering for months, though initially he continued to work as a matter of duty. His death, after a dominance of 18 years, 'orphaned' the company and was a loss to the theatre world. Comparison with him was a cross for all later singer–actors to bear.

Meanwhile Shankarrao Mujumdar – the seniormost employee and former actor – had taken over as manager in 1893 and received a mixed assessment as efficient and autocratic. His original contributions cannot be denied. A well-educated man, he started the magazine *Rangabhumi* (Theatre) about 1908 and wrote biographies of Kirloskar and some prominent actors. He also arranged for the education of the boys in the company (employing R.G. Gadkari as a teacher in 1906), started a printing press to print the company's handbills and to absorb the adolescent boys rendered useless after their voices broke. His most abiding though controversial contribution was Kirloskar Theatre built at Pune and inaugurated with fanfare in the presence of Sir Muir Mackenzie, governor of the Bombay Presidency, in 1909.[6] The project's escalating cost and consequent economy measures created a rift in the company which had been in dire financial straits since 1901–1902, unable to pay the servants' salaries. Competition from other companies was also a factor.

Kirloskar Company's first new singer–actor was the tall, well-built Narayanrao (alias Nanasaheb) Joglekar. A college graduate working towards a legal career through B.G. Tilak's law classes, he had declined Bhaurao's earlier inducements. But on Mujumdar's appeal, Tilak gave him the advice (which sounds highly surprising today) that he should

[4] Tembe, *Jivan Vyasang*, pp. 8–9.

[5] A moving description of the solemn farewell is given by Bodas, *Majhi Bhumika*, pp. 57–58.

[6] Nadkarni, *Balgandharva and the Marathi Theatre*, p. 44.

forget a legal career and join 'Kirloskar' – 'an excellent company of which I am proud' – which really needed him.[7] The talented Joglekar, lacking the will and skill to cultivate admirers and woo audiences, was somewhat marginalised within the company; and appreciation came to him only in the last year of his short life.

The chief inheritor of Bhaurao's mantle as a stri-party was Narayanrao Rajhans, alias Bal Gandharva (June 1888–July 1967, henceforth Gandharva), who soon achieved a cult status. Narayan belonged to a poor, but musically talented Deshastha Brahmin family of Satara district, had some schooling, and also formal lessons in classical music which included good diction and evocative singing.[8] His informal concert in the neighbourhood of Deccan College during a visit to Pune in 1898 was highly successful. Tilak happened to overhear him and spontaneously likened him to a little celestial singer or 'Bal Gandharva'; the title stayed with him all his life.[9] Offers from theatre companies poured in, but were dismissed by his father until expensive family illnesses nudged him in that direction. Meanwhile an attack of fever left Narayan partially deaf. While being treated in Kolhapur he sang for an impressed Shahu Maharaj, who arranged both for his treatment and music lessons. Finally Narayan agreed to join 'Kirloskar' and play female roles.

Narayan debuted informally as Nati in the prologue to Deval's *Sharada*, independently staged for a select princely audience at the State Theatre in Miraj in 1905. Tilak persuaded his parents to let him continue by agreeing to pay compensation (to the tune of Rs 20,000) for any loss or harm. Immediately Narayan made his formal debut in 'Kirloskar' as 'Bal Gandharva' (emphasising the Tilak connection in the advertisement) in the female lead in *Shakuntal* (Acts I-IV) at the new State Theatre at Sangli. Shahu Maharaj was specially invited and offered encouragement to Narayan before the show. The play's tremendous success led to a celebration of its silver jubilee that year at Pune (where Narayan's maternal uncle – not yet reconciled to his dubious career choice – tried unsuccessfully to abduct him). It took

[7] Bodas, *Majhi Bhumika*, p. 87.

[8] This life sketch is based on Desai, *Balgandharva*; Nadkarni, *Balgandharva and the Marathi Theatre*; Mohan Nadkarni, *Bal Gandharva: The Nonpareil Thespian*, New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2002 (1988). Additional references are indicated where necessary.

[9] The legend is disputed in Rajwade, *Atmavritta*, pp. 131–32.

Narayan five years to overcome stage-fright. His popularity soared with classics like *Saubhadra* and with Kolhatkar's new plays especially admired by Deccan Collegians. In fact Kirloskar Company's patronage, especially in a city like Pune, came overwhelmingly from college students; Tembe claims that this was because of Narayan's stage persona as a contemporary young woman.[10]

Initially awkward and hesitant on stage, Narayan gained confidence with coaching by Deval who explained to him the distinct deportment characteristic of different classes of women.[11] Soon his woodenness disappeared and he spun magic on stage, becoming for the next few years the company's undisputed star. In 1907, the company elders had found a bride for him at his mother's insistence, because actors were notoriously undesirable as bridegrooms.

From about 1910, Narayan (now referred to deferentially as Narayanrao) attracted a circle of Deccan Collegians. This conferred social prestige upon him and by extension upon actors in general. Among his special friends was K.P. alias Balasaheb Pandit who was to manage his career in later years. It started as a close friendship, with Gandharva borrowing money which Pandit – son of a wealthy official at Kolhapur – found it easy to lend. Gandharva's concerts began to be frequently arranged at Deccan College (with permission from Joglekar and Mujumdar; no junior actor could leave the company premises without permission). Gradually his lifestyle also became leisurely as befitted a star. He was not fond of general reading. On his free days he would go to bed around midnight, be woken up at ten in the morning, have his bath at one or later and then eat his (now cold) meal, the others having eaten about noon. The rest of the afternoon would be spent in a rehearsal or a nap, followed by tea at six. Then he would visit the home of one of his wealthy admirers or college students.

Gradually 'Kirloskar' became primarily a company of singers with acting regarded as subsidiary, according to theatre critic P.R. Lele.[12] Lele recalls his first encounter with the company in 1910 when it was referred to as 'paradise', with just a hint of sarcasm. It was also known as a *sansthaan* – a princely state. Lele saw theatre companies

[10] Tembe, *Maza Jivan-vihar*, p. 90.

[11] Nadkarni, *Balgandharva and the Marathi Theatre*, p. 32.

[12] Purushottam Ramchandra Lele, *Natak-mandalichya Birhadi*, Mumbai: Keshav Bhikaji Dhavale, 1946, pp. 1–31.

of those times as 'humane associations' in that their members were charitable about the frailties of others and ready to offer help without expectation of returns.

This was the time Joglekar finally received recognition for his memorable role as Dhairyadhar in Khadilkar's *Manapaman* (1910); some claimed that he was the only 'real' Dhairyadhar who ever walked the stage. Joglekar impressed the audiences far more than Gandharva as Bhamini.[13] Sadly, Joglekar died in 1911, soon after his popularity peaked.

Lele captures the excitement of the opening of Khadilkar's *Manapaman* at Mumbai on 12 March 1911, having reserved a seat for the first show through a money order from Pune, in anticipation of a full house.[14] The performance was scheduled as a Sunday matinee, its exact duration being uncertain as songs would be elaborated at length and further prolonged by encores. The venue, the spacious Ripon Theatre, was packed. When Khadilkar took a front seat, the audience rose to catch a glimpse of him. Excitement and impatience reached a fever pitch; impatient clapping and whistling started in the pit, unusually for a Kirloskar show, and lasted through the prologue. When the play proper started, Gandharva-as-Bhamini was greeted by a thunderous applause as were all his songs – this in spite of his sore throat and his having lost his daughter that very morning. In a following scene with Bodas as Lakshmidhar, laughter erupted at every sentence. Joglekar also received applause at his entry; his last song in Act I was so highly appreciated that the curtain was re-opened for an encore. The three actors retained their sparkling form throughout. Despite a surfeit of music, the audience stayed on to hear the musical Bharat-vakya.

This adulation displays one side of the deep divide between highbrow and popular assessments of the play – it has been loved by audiences for a century, but reviled by critics like Shanta Gokhale. The fact that Lele's description pivots largely on the songs and their reception reinforces Gokhale's critique that the play marked the death of the sangit natak – 'killed by music'.[15]

On Joglekar's death, the company's proprietorship devolved upon Mujumdar, Gandharva, and Bodas. The latter two, along with Tembe,

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[13] *Ibid*., p. 11.

[14] *Ibid*, pp. 43–49.

[15] Gokhale, *Playwright at the Centre*, p. 37.

decided to leave, irked by the discipline and seemingly unnecessary economies imposed by Mujumdar, to set up a new company. The news of the imminent split spread like wildfire, prompting well-wishers to avert it. Tilak was in Mandalay prison at the time; but N.C. Kelkar tried for a rapprochement as an advisor, as did playwright Gadkari. At Mujumdar's request Shahu Maharaj also tried to intercede, but the inevitable split came in 1913.

The vacancy – but not the vacuum – left by Gandharva's departure was filled temporarily by Dinanath Mangeshkar, billed as 'Master Dinanath'. Kirloskar Company survived for a couple of chequered decades and closed down in 1937.

## Offshoots of Kirloskar Company

### *Gandharva Natak Mandali*

Gandharva's career, personality, and theatre company were to merge indelibly to emblematise the Marathi musical theatre itself. 'Nutan Kirloskar Mandali' started by Gandharva, Bodas, and Tembe at Pune was quickly renamed 'Gandharva Natak Mandali', acknowledging the valence of his mystique – which still survives. The new company tried to assuage the guilt for its 'betrayal' partly by forging links with the parent company – Deval (who had left 'Kirloskar' in 1906) was inducted as a 'rehearsal master' and Kirloskar's first manager, Sathe, as its new manager. Even the chief Brahmin cook (doubling as Kirloskar's priest) joined the new company, secretly bringing with him a sacred stone from the old company's worship room to aid this 'Kirloskarisation'. Gandharva's wealthy friend Pandit arranged a loan for the necessary capital. A serious dispute about performing old plays was settled by sharing the rights. Young boys were recruited; one of them, Shantaram Vanakudre of Kolhapur, later became the famous film director V. Shantaram. (It had been Mujumdar's favourite project to add dances by boys dressed as girls in as many plays as possible to enhance their appeal.) Rich costumes and expensive saris for the company were obtained from the families of affluent admirers.

At its first performance (Kolhatkar's *Mukanayak* at Mumbai's Elphinstone Theatre) in September 1913, Sir Bhalchandra Bhatavdekar announced the company's inauguration and Dr Vinayak Sokarji Trilokekar (Sokar Bapuji's son) made a congratulatory speech. The play had a successful run; the company toured throughout Maharashtra, and visited Baroda and Indore. Gandharva's cult status was established

by the sale of his photographs in large numbers; wealthy young men even had their photos taken in the female dress worn by him.

Soon Gandharva Company received patronage from the Maharaja of Baroda and advertised the fact freely, partly to assuage the stigma of betrayal in leaving 'Kirloskar', although in financial terms it brought no benefit. The company enjoyed uneven success for the next 20 years, acquiring notoriety – and debts – for lavish presentation and an opulent life-style. Objecting to such unnecessary expenditure, Tembe left in 1915, surrendering his partnership against compensation. (He opened his short-lived Shivraj Sangit Mandali; most of its leading actors were poached by Sawai Tukojirao Holkar of Indore to establish his own drama company in 1919.) Pandit, who had instigated the rift, now became the company's new manager. He started siphoning off the company's money for his personal ventures and was later involved in a court case. Bodas surrendered his partnership in 1919 against heavy compensation, leaving Gandharva the sole owner. At this point P.S. Laud, a leading solicitor of Mumbai (and father of Durga Khote née Laud), stepped in as the company's chief advisor to help recover its fortunes.

In its heyday, the company's arrival in Mumbai – as in other cities – generated tremendous excitement; the spectacle is evocatively described by Durga Khote. The sight of the company's advertisements splashed on walls led Mumbai's theatre aficianados to loiter eagerly in the compound of Nana Shankarshet's temple where it usually set up house in an adjacent upstairs apartment.[16] It was practically a royal township (*sansthaan*) carried along in three or four large railway wagons filled with curtains, wings, trunks, wooden chests, bedding rolls, pots and pans – 'like a whole town moving'. The baggage was incongruously accompanied by a herd of cows and buffaloes, along with the milkman. In the vanguard was the dapper Pandit, issuing orders while eager spectators thronged him, demanding advance tickets.[17]

Durgabai also describes, from personal experience, an all-night 'reading' of a new script held for the main actors and a select coterie of 'wealthy merchants, eminent citizens, renowned public speakers,

[16] This was located in the compound of Shankarshet's mansion near Nana Chowk named after him. The mansion has been replaced by a high-rise apartment house now, but the temple still remains; personal information.

[17] Khote, *Mi – Durga Khote*, p. 48.

and leaders' who, as patrons, were also regarded as guides and well-wishers. Discussions and consultations ensued, and changes were at times made. At a reading of Gadkari's *Ekach Pyala*, Bodas's 'fluent, emotion-filled reading made everyone weep during every scene'. The demand to change the tragic ending was adamantly vetoed by Gandharva, and his 'assessment proved correct. *Ekach Pyala* yielded untold sums of money – not just to Gandharva Company, but to other companies as well!'[18] (Usually the author would be present at the reading, but Gadkari had died shortly after completing the play.)

Gandharva's expenditure for the company could not be curtailed. In December 1920, on Khadilkar's *Draupadi* Gandharva spent Rs 70,000 or more – with lavish sets and costly carpets for the durbar scenes, silk and brocade costumes for the 'royal' male and female characters, expensive silk saris for Draupadi, and specially painted scenes by the famed artist Baburao Painter of Kolhapur. Each of Gandharva's entries was to be a 'fragrant' experience for the audience with sprayed perfumes; but the strong smell affected his voice and perfumes worth Rs 5,000 had to be given away. New musical accompaniment was arranged – with three reed organs in the place of the old harmonium, and two *sarangi*s (one played by the famous Kader Bux). Unfortunately the play was not a success.[19]

In 1921 the company's financial straits became public when a moneylender tried to attach its property as part payment. At this time Gandharva owed Rs 1,80,000 to 72 money lenders. Laud intervened, contributed funds and raised money from other well-wishers, paid off some moneylenders and appeased others. Meanwhile Gandharva proudly declined the offer of Mumbai's wealthy citizens and merchants to give him a purse. But his expenditure continued; a couple of years later he bought a Chrysler. In the mid-1920s he made a profit of Rs 22,000 in Solapur; before the money could be deposited in the bank, a cloth vendor arrived, and Gandharva spent most of it on silk saris. It was only after the company's profitable tour of Vidarbha in 1927 that he cleared off his debts amounting by then to over Rs 3,00,000.

It is difficult today to appreciate the extent of Gandharva's hegemony of the Marathi cultural scene. Theatre-lovers adored him as a

[18] *Ibid.*, pp. 50–51.
[19] *Ibid.*, pp. 49–50.

sovereign, and, intoxicated with success he immersed himself in the theatre world to the extent of blurring the line between it and the practical reality around him. The problem was to find a suitable male lead to play opposite him: the spot was filled successively by Tembe, Bodas, Vinayakrao Patvardhan (a noted disciple of V.D. Paluskar), Krishnarao Chonkar, Walawalkar, and Gangadharpant Londhe.

In 1922, at the age of 34, Gandharva attempted to switch to male roles, but failed because of his effeminate style of acting and singing. His female roles retained their appeal despite his stoutness and baldness necessitating wigs. (Female impersonators grew their hair long and off the stage tied it in a knot hidden under a cap or turban.) Tragedies followed in 1928: his oldest surviving daughter died on the day of a performance which he refused to cancel. But later the company had to cancel many shows because of his hoarseness caused by bathing in cold water and drinking iced water even in winter. (A hundred pounds of ice had to be ordered from Mumbai to every place the company visited.)

In 1930 Gandharva's older daughter (of the surviving two) was married, and the money he borrowed for the lavish wedding and his son-in-law Mr Wable's trip to England started his second large debt. Paying this off was far more difficult because of his advancing age. The company's expenses had shot up – with salaries, food bills, opulent sets, and accessories. The earnings dipped, largely because of the erratic state of Gandharva's voice. Another alleged reason for this vocal problem was his new habit of loudly singing the popular devotional bhajans from the play *Sant Kanhopatra* at the company's premises every evening. Crowds of men and women attended this event, thus accessing his music free of charge. An additional external factor was the entry of young singer–actresses on the stage – Hirabai Badodekar in the late 1920s and Jyotsna Bhole in the early 1930s, when Gandharva was over 40 years old.

In early 1928 Bodas had rejoined Gandharva Company. He was one of the company's attractions, as was the *tabla*-player Thirakwa. But after 1930, the signs of decline were evident, despite princely patronage from Kolhapur, Baroda, Gwalior, and Indore. Bodas lays the blame squarely on Gandharva's ineffectual functioning as a proprietor: he had conveniently allowed himself to be controlled, right from the beginning, by various small and overlapping groups (including Pandit, various actors, and also Gandharva's mother and wife), all of whom had then treated the talented youngster as gullible

and impractical.[20] Gandharva never accepted responsibility, honoured his promises, or exercised economy. In 1930, the company's monthly expenditure was about Rs 9,000, and his personal expenses for his family about Rs 3,000, claims Bodas.

Finally, at the end of 1934, Gandharva, now 46, disbanded his company, and accepted a six-film contract from Shantaram of Prabhat Film Company, expecting to earn Rs 1,00,000 per film – a royal sum even after clearing his debt of Rs 70,000.[21] Shantaram's choice of *Dharmatma* as their first film – with Gandharva in the lead role of Sant Eknath – was astute, given the androgenous traits expected of a stri-party attempting a male role. But the new entertainment medium – impersonal and mechanical – did not agree with the actor sustained by the constant intoxicating adulation and applause from a live audience. His uninspired acting disappointed even his devoted admirers and the film flopped. But the photo of Gandharva in an aristocratic-looking male dress which Prabhat had used for advance publicity – instead of stills from the film – became instantly popular. (Perhaps this prompted some of his admirers to fault Shantaram for not casting Gandharva in a more 'suitable' role as a young and handsome hero in the traditional mould, claiming rather unrealistically that he would then have left a permanent imprint on the film world.)[22] Shantaram agreed to release him from his contract.

But Gandharva immediately attempted another film under financial pressure. Dadasaheb Torne, proprietor of Pune's Saraswati Cinetone had filmed a short scene from *Svayamvar* to gauge Gandharva's screen impact. This fragment was 'so attractive in terms of Narayanrao's appearance, speech, acting, and singing that he looked like a slightly plump but beautiful princess', thought V.S. Desai.[23] Thus emerged the idea of making a 'stage talkie' which would serve as a memorial to Gandharva. The choice settled on Desai's *Amrit-siddhi*, now renamed *Sadhvi Meerabai* – in partnership with Baburao Ruikar (owner of Kolhapur's Royal Cinema), as a Bal Gandharva–Ruikar film. The unsuccessful 'film' was only the stage performance shot with a static camera, with Gandharva in the eponymous role. This is now

[20] Bodas, *Majhi Bhumika*, pp. 266–67.

[21] Bapu Watve, *Ek Hoti Prabhat-nagari*, Pune: A.V. Damle, 1993, pp. 100–08.

[22] Desai, *Balgandharva*, p. 199.

[23] *Ibid*., p. 200.

the only – and unfortunately not attractive – visual evidence of his female impersonation, filmed within a month and a half. Gandharva was offered Rs 25,000, but at the time of actually signing the contract he opted instead for a share in the profit. The film's failure deprived him of the last chance to partially repay his debt.[24]

In 1935 Gandharva restarted his theatre company, with a depleted set of actors and accompanists. New talent was recruited in the form of Krishnarao Chonkar and Gauharbai Karnataki (earlier Chonkar's mistress). But despite her sweet voice and competent singing, Gauharbai failed to please audiences allegedly because of her lack of good looks and Kannada-inflected Marathi. Her gradual intimacy with Gandharva alienated the company's advisors and well-wishers; and his male roles paired with her female roles held no appeal for the audiences – who compelled him to act in female roles again, at the age of 50. In 1943, with more financial trouble, Gandharva left the company along with Gauharbai, having already left his wife and family.

**Plate 8.2:** Dinanath Mangeshkar (left) as Sulochana in Savarkar's *Sannyasta Khadga*, c. 1931.

### *Dinanath Mangeshkar's Balwant Natak Mandali*

A four-year stint in Kirloskar Company gave Dinanath Mangeshkar the confidence to launch his own company. Music was in his blood, born as he was (in December 1900) in the Gomantak Maratha community: his mother, Yesubai Rane, had been dedicated to the service of the Mangesh temple in Goa.[25] She looked after the temple, and sang and danced

[24] Desai blames Ruikar for unimaginative filming; *Ibid.*, pp. 201–04. The film is available in the National Film Archives, Pune.

[25] Jathar, *Dina Dise Maja*; and Vandana Ravindra Ghangurde, *Breed Tuze Jagi Dinanath: Ma. Dinanath Yanche Sangitik Charitra*, Pune: Anubandha Prakashan, 2011.

on festive occasions. Dinanath and his three younger siblings (of whom two survived childhood) were born of her permanent relationship with the Brahmin temple priest and famous kirtankar, Ganeshbhat Navathe. From his father, Dinanath learned clear enunciation and voice projection, from his mother and maternal family, a taste for music. In keeping with the Rane family tradition of men playing musical instruments, Yesubai tried to arrange sarangi lessons for little Dina, leading him by the hand the five miles to the teacher's house and carrying the instrument in the other hand. After his disinclination to continue, tabla lessons – of equally short duration – were arranged for him. Then a discovery of his impressive singing talent redirected his training. His initial forays in the field included playing the brief part of Saraswati in the prologue of the play to celebrate the annual temple festival and singing for temple visitors for a small charge. Gradually he progressed to informal concerts at the houses of music-lovers, especially because his repertoire included also stage music. He sang Gandharva's songs very well, but consciously desisted from imitating his style in order to develop his own.

After Gandharva's departure from 'Kirloskar' in 1913, Mujumdar and others travelled to Goa and its vicinity in search of young singing talent, and 'discovered' Dinanath. He first started performing secondary female roles in 1914 as 'Master Dinanath'. His voice, traversing three octaves with ease, was exceptional. In 1915 both 'Kirloskar' and 'Gandharva' visited Hyderabad and toyed with the idea of performing a Hindi–Urdu play for the wealthy music-lovers there. Kirloskar's *Taj-e-Wafa* was the result, and Dinanath became a sensation with his singing accompanied by hand movements made by dancers. He also made his mark in another new Hindi–Urdu play, *Kanton me Phool* (based on the mythological episode of Prahlad) which was inducted into the company's repertoire in 1917 and became popular especially in Nagpur. Among Marathi plays he excelled in Gadkari's *Punya-prabhav* as Kinkini.

In early 1918 Dinanath left Kirloskar Company with Krishnarao Kolhapure and Chintamanrao Kolhatkar, to form 'Balwant Sangit Mandali' at Borivli, a suburb of Mumbai. As the company's star, Dinanath was allotted a lion's share of the profits: out of every rupee, or 16 annas, Dinanath was to receive 7 annas, Kolhapure 5, and Kolhatkar 3, with one anna to be added to the savings. As a non-singing actor, Kolhatkar received the smallest share, but served the company as a professional manager and director.

Dinanath was soon recognised as an innovative singer, with his wide circle of admirers placing him on par with the legendary Gandharva. Dinanath's forte was music; by all accounts, he showed less interest in acting. Critics claimed that he got through the dialogue rather disinterestedly and restlessly, waiting for his songs at which he excelled. He entered into a role – female or male – only when it suited his own personality as an independent-minded, courageous, patriotic individual. Again, despite his tremendous success, he felt that actors could achieve fame and money, but no social status or prestige, and discouraged his younger brother Kamalnath and oldest daughter Lata from entering the profession. (Lata did act in a few films as a child, but out of financial compulsion, after her father's death.)

Balwant Company initially performed the classic plays and its first offering was *Shakuntal*, with Dinanath in the lead role. Its first original success was Gadkari's *Bhav-bandhan*, written especially for 'Balwant' with the female lead of Latika intended for Dinanath. Gadkari had left a handwritten note along with the manuscript (completed just before his death) giving monopoly rights to 'Balwant'. It was successful enough to allow the company to repay its initial debt of Rs 30,000; the company was never in debt again. (This was ensured by dismissing the corrupt accountant.) Gadkari's other play for Balwant was (the incomplete) *Raj-sannyas*, with the powerful though brief female role of Shivangi written for Dinanath. This incomplete play was first performed at Indore at the behest of Tukojirao Holkar in1922; its success led to several performances elsewhere. Out of affection Gandharva had granted Dinanath oral permission to perform Gadkari's *Ekach Pyala*, except during Gandharva Company's stay in Mumbai and Pune; but Dinanath's success as Sindhu prompted Gandharva to withdraw the permission out of professional rivalry. Balwant Company also performed old classics and arguably Dinanath's most famous male role was Dhairyadhar in *Manapaman*. In a controversial move he changed all the tunes in the play, giving them his own twist: these are allegedly the tunes sung today. To the company's Hindi–Urdu repertoire was now added the Hindi translation of *Manapaman* that Khadilkar himself had commissioned (although the songs were sung in Marathi).

Then followed a hectic search for new plays. C. Kolhatkar persuaded even V.D. Savarkar, the militant nationalist leader, to write for the company; this creation, *Sannyasta Khadga*, also showcased

Dinanath (Plate 8.2). Another patriotic and tremendously successful play was Vir Vamanrao Joshi's *Rana-dundubhi*, with Dinanath as Tejaswini. The company's other renowned playwrights were S.K. Kolhatkar; Khare-shastri (whose *Ugra-mangal* featured Dinanath as Padmavati); N. C. Kelkar; and Vishram Bedekar (whose *Brahmakumari* had Dinanath in the male role of Gautam). Generally the company was inspired by novelty, experimentation, and a social and political ideology. In its 16-year duration, 'Balwant' performed 16 new and seven old plays. Dinanath's special contribution to Marathi stage music was the Panjabi inflection he introduced, and his contribution to theatre was his classical Kathak dance in *Ugra-mangal*.

*Brahmakumari* (1933) was fated to be Balwant Company's last play. The tough competition from cinema led the owners to invest in a film company. 'Balwant Pictures Corporation' at Sangli (1934–1938) produced a few films, including a mythological (*Krishnarjuna Yuddha*, with Dinanath as Arjun), a religious film (*Pundalik*), some social films, and the Hindi *Andheri Duniya*. But inexperience soon led to disastrous failure and a criminal case was filed against Kolhatkar and Dinanath (who could have escaped as a Portuguese citizen of Goa, but did not). 'Balwant' had earlier tried other ventures, like a publishing firm (1921–1936), printing press (1923–1936) and even projecting silent films in a travelling tent; but none could be sustained. Efforts in 1938 to revive Balwant Sangit Mandali, with Dinanath as the sole owner, failed because his uncertain health led to cancellation of shows, coupled with the economic decline of the early war years. Under financial compulsion, Dinanath closed down the company in 1940 and was by 1941 reduced almost to penury. In 1942, at the age of 41, he died of cirrhosis of the liver caused by excessive drinking. His death left his wife and five children – Lata (initially named Hridaya, but renamed Latika after Dinanath's tremendously successful role in *Bhav-bandhan*), Meena, Asha, Usha, and Hridaynath – in dire straits.[26]

At its height, Balwant Company had employed up to 90 people at a time, in various capacities, who lived like an extended family guided by admirable discipline.[27] Its concern extended to buying a

[26] In 1927 Dinanath had lost his father, infant daughter, and wife; he then married his late wife's younger sister.

[27] Cited in Jathar, *Dina Dise Maja*, pp. 34–35; and Ghangurde, *Breed Tuze Jagi*, pp. 60–62.

life insurance policy for every actor. The married actors had their families staying with them; additionally any member of the company could have a guest for a maximum of three days.

When a new play was to be staged, every actor was required to copy down his part of the script. All actors had to attend rehearsals – from 9 to 11:30 in the morning and 1:30 to 5:30 in the afternoon – including those who did not have a part in the play concerned, though only the new actors were made to rehearse old plays. On the day of a show, only the morning rehearsal was held, with another on the afternoon of the following day. These were held in a large room with three sitting mattresses. On one was kept Kirloskar's photo, in front of which was placed the list of actors and their roles, to be consulted individually. The second mattress was reserved for the playwright, and the third for the director and the company owners; the rest sat on a thick carpet. (Dinanath usually joined the others on the carpet.) Salaries were paid regularly on the 10th of every month; loans were also available.

On their free days the actors had to be home by 9:30 p.m., to get adequate rest and look fresh on stage. They were discouraged from going about much, to avoid exposure and keep alive public curiosity. The cast had to present itself on time for meals which were taken together, except through advance notice. Two excellent meals in the vegetarian style were served every day and special delicacies on festive days. On the day of the show, a simple meal was also served after the show. Tea was served twice a day, and an unlimited supply was on offer during a show.

The company looked after its members well. It employed a permanent barber and a servant to fetch hot bath water for all, to bathe young boys and wash their clothes. A local laundryman was employed at every place the company visited.

There was a week off before the company was to go on tour. Originally the whole group travelled in the same third class compartment, but with success came hierarchy: the three owners travelled second class. The company's luggage had originally required two wagons, but *Rana-dundubhi* required four. When on tour, the company displayed on every Thursday boards with the names of the plays to be performed on Saturday, Monday, and Wednesday; it was not customary to display the names of the actors. New costumes were placed reverently before Kirloskar's photo before being distributed, as a convention rather than a rule.

The actors who were not sufficiently trained in music were taught by a special teacher; the trained singer–actors rehearsed on their own, which became an informal learning occasion for the others. Opportunities to enhance general knowledge came through the occasional visits and stays of artists, singers, playwrights, and public leaders.

## Other Companies

Remarkable among the other major companies was the Swadesh-hitachintak Natak Mandali ('A theatre company desirous of national welfare', henceforth 'Swadesh'), the first company of educated – even English-educated – actors who behaved like the town elite and held themselves aloof.[28] It was informally owned and managed by Janubhau Nimkar (who had started his career in a Parsi Urdu company and then worked in 'Kirloskar'); he was known for extreme frugality bordering on miserliness. The company had received patronage from Shahu Maharaj and also nurtured the child prodigy Keshav ('Keshya') Bhosale.

### *Keshavrao Bhosale and Lalita-kaladarsha Company*

Keshav was a Maratha by caste and born in 1890 into a well-to-do family which owned a house in Kolhapur.[29] His father lost all his money on an obsession with alchemy, then mortgaged and sold his house, and died soon after. Keshav's devastated mother had to work as a domestic help to support herself and her three sons. Ultimately she hired out the two older sons Datta or Dattoba (then about 12 years old) and Keshav (then five) as servants to Swadesh Company then playing

**Plate 8.3:** Keshavrao Bhosale as and in *Damini*, c. 1908.

[28] Varerkar, *Maza Nataki Sansar*, pp. 30–31.

[29] Chapekar, *Smriti-dhan*, pp. 76–89 and scattered references.

at Kolhapur. Little Keshav was even made to wash the clothes of the chief stri-party famous for his role as Sharada, and vowed to play the role himself one day. The actor fell ill on the day of a performance and 11-year-old Keshav offered to substitute for him. Vastly amused, the proprietor indulged him by making him sing some songs and recite dialogues, and was amazed by the lad's flawless response. Keshav played Sharada that day and continued to do so for years, making the play more popular than had 'Kirloskar'.

But this success did not translate into comparable monetary gain. In 1908 Keshav, Dattoba (also an actor by now), and four others left the company to start Lalita-kaladarsha Sangit Natak Mandali (henceforth 'Lalitakala') with a loan. The following year the moneylender started demanding repayment; the other proprietors left in a panic, leaving Keshav the sole owner. He paid off the debt within a year. (Dattoba later rejoined the company, but as a salaried employee at Rs 100 a month.) Bhosale's singing and acting style won him a large following and his company provided tough competition to 'Gandharva'. The admirers of the two singing stars formed adversarial factions. Bhosale was offered princely patronage but declined it and advertised the fact that he was under 'public patronage' – in a pointed retaliation to 'Gandharva'. The two companies were to stage joint performances twice, as will be seen.

Unfortunately Bhosale soon came down with typhoid. When the fever went down after 21 days, his enthusiastic and misguided out-of-town friends celebrated his recovery with rich foods and liquor, making him break the strict diet advised by the doctor, and Bhosale died in October 1921.

In his will Bhosale had instructed that the company be run jointly by the two senior actors Bapusaheb Pendharkar and Nanasaheb Chapekar if they wished, or sold to pay the money to his wife. (He had left her an estate of over Rs 1,00,000.) They agreed to run the company, but friction developed after a few years. Realising that he was being cheated in financial matters, Chapekar left in 1924. He was soon approached by Mujumdar to join the almost-defunct 'Kirloskar' as a partner; but bitter experience had made him suspicious of partnerships. In 1925 he bought 'Kirloskar' with a loan and became the sole proprietor. The remaining actors in 'Swadesh' formed Natya-vinod Mandali.

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Among other companies was Natyakala Pravartak Company which staged Shakespeare and some classical musical plays. Its induction of Rambhau Kundgolkar, a prime disciple of Abdul Karim Khan (who was given the title 'Sawai Gandharva'), made its popularity soar. Another favourite disciple of Abdul Karim Khan was Shankarrao Sarnaik who also joined theatre, much to his teacher's dismay.

An innovative venture was Balmohan Sangit Natak Mandali with only child actors. One of them, destined to be a star was Saudagar Gore (1918–1998), known first as Master Saudagar and later as 'Chhota Gandharva'.[30] He was invited to join the company because of his melodious voice and good singing, and initially played both female and male roles – the latter in most of P.K. Atre's plays of the 1930s. In 1943 he and some fellow actors left to found their own Kalavilas Company which closed down in 1949 leaving a heavy debt. From 1950 to 1960 he worked as an independent actor on a contract basis and amassed great wealth.[31] Part of his initial popularity was his singing style which approximated Gandharva's, until the latter advised him to develop his own individual style.[32] He himself counted as his ideals Gandharva, Dinanath, and Abdul Karim Khan.[33] Gandharva had once invited him to join his company at the suggestion of Gauharbai, but he politely declined.[34]

These were some of the chief theatre companies, but there were hosts of others which usually performed mythologicals, prose plays, and musicals by turn. They numbered about 35 from the late 1880s to about 1930.[35]

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[30] V.Y. Gadgil and Sharad Gurjar (eds), *Svararaj Chhota Gandharva*, Mumbai: Manorama Prakashan, 1992. He belonged to the Devang Koshti caste; Prabhakar Jathar, *Svara-sauharda*, Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1995, p. 69.

[31] Kamala Phadke, 'Tin Chandanche Sardar' in *Svararaj Chhota Gandharva*, pp. 34–35.

[32] Nalini Wable, 'Nananche Chhotba' in *Ibid.*, pp. 94–95.

[33] Phadke, 'Tin Chandanche', p. 40.

[34] Cited in Jathar, *Svara-sauharda*, p. 73.

[35] Varerkar, *Maza Nataki Sansar*, scattered references; Desai, *Makhamalicha Padada*, pp. 9–10. The exact dates for the start or closure of these companies are not always available.

## The All-male Theatre Community

The uniqueness of an all-male theatre community, living together in varying degrees of harmony, is most succinctly captured by V.S. Desai whose early fascination with theatre exposed him to this distinctive world long before he became a famous playwright.

> Its domestic arrangements involved acquiring large lodgings . . . creating additional rooms through cloth partitions, and having up to 70 persons of diverse dispositions crowd in there . . . Every morning or evening, some hoarse-voiced brat sat screeching at the *tanpura* and gave others a headache. The renowned singers never needed to practise. With about 70 persons staying together, there was occasional friction . . . But this did not at all mean that these lodgings became exercise halls for quarrelsome actors freed from family encumbrances. Continual familiarity with high-class literature through the medium of plays made the actors' speech richer and sharper than that of others. There were always a couple of guests staying in the lodgings and a line of local visitors through the day – including artists, men of learning and interest in theatre, merchants, pleasure-seekers, and idlers. This colourful company made one unmindful of when the day dawned and when it ended. The custom of about 70 persons having tea and meals together twice a day provided the pleasures of life in college hostels. There were both flaws and fun in this lifestyle, as in the Hindu extended family.[36]

The journalist P.R. Lele eulogistically endorses the web of organic relationships which made this motley group 'a miniature world', referring to 'Kirloskar', where a gatecrasher could easily stay a month or two, eat well, and watch all plays free of charge. Constant touring made interdependence a way of life in the community.[37] Tembe claims:

> Only life in a theatre company demonstrates how closeness in the daily routine like living in the same house and eating together unknowingly creates an affective affinity and how it erupts on special occasions. These are fifty people from fifty different families, unrelated by blood; but everybody rushes to help when one is in trouble.[38]

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[36] Desai, *Makhamalicha Padada*, pp. 59–60.
[37] Lele, *Natak-mandalichya Birhadi*, p. 6.
[38] Tembe, *Maza Jivan-vihar*, p. 224.

Both distressing and joyful occasions should be experienced in a company's lodgings, he concludes.

There was method in the seemingly 'madding crowd'. The company was a small, all-male community arranged around a hierarchy of 'stars', topped by singer–actors, followed by non-singing but important and popular actors, with young boys playing minor female roles at the bottom. This ranking was jealously guarded by those at the top.

Most companies, following the tradition set by 'Kirloskar', followed a Brahmin lifestyle, with regular and good meals (cooked and served by a Brahmin cook). On the day of the performance, the actors ate a light meal before the show, had snacks available during the show, and a proper meal after returning in the early hours of the morning. The daily worship ritual was observed.

Occasionally, some important actors were allotted private rooms within the lodgings, or made their own arrangements outside. Some companies had playwrights-in-residence who usually supervised the rehearsals of their own plays; most had rehearsal masters. On tours, the company rented a large wada for their accommodation, or had other favourite sites, such as Gandharva Company and Nana Shankarshet temple.

'Kirloskar' and 'Gandharva' set the norm for ideal companies. Perhaps even more impressive was 'Swadesh' whose well-educated actors usually dressed like lawyers or lower-level government officials. 'Even their stri-party boys dressed most decently'.[39] By inference and independent description, lesser companies were easily spotted by their lack of refinement in general deportment. Bodas describes their actors specialising in male roles as show-offs who wore an attitude of general indifference and used blunt and vulgar language. Most of them were unmarried and visited prostitutes; addiction to drink and drugs was common. The stri-party boys, in their late teens, had to be fair-skinned (or at most 'wheatish' in complexion), they kept their long hair well-oiled and shiny, wore a dot of kunku between their eye-brows, and preferred finespun dhotars. They were easy prey for prostitutes who enjoyed dalliance with the good-looking actors and the free viewing of plays this enabled. These young men were usually debilitated by venereal diseases and listless.[40]

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[39] Varerkar, *Maza Nataki Sansar*, pp. 30–31.

[40] Bodas, *Majhi Bhumika*, p. 27.

The harmony stressed by many of these descriptions had a reverse side in the competition – open or latent – and intrigues that went on, sometimes even aimed at ousting certain actors, as described elsewhere.

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There has been much speculation about the 'all-maleness' of these micro-communities and two results have been strongly hinted at: a hankering after women and homoerotic behaviour. The former led to frequenting of prostitutes that was common knowledge. (Bodas mentions that 'Kirloskar' offered free medical service except in case of venereal disease.)[41] There were also more innocent ways of obtaining the longed-for sight of women: Mujumdar and his 'Kirloskar' friends are alleged to have stationed themselves at a vantage point on the veranda of their lodgings with a clear sight of a common water-tap where the neighbourhood women gathered to fetch water. When the young pioneering actress Kamalabai Gokhale joined her actor–husband at their own company's lodgings, male actors tried to jostle her in passing.[42] But hers was a solitary case, given the near-total absence of women from the theatre world.

Most vulnerable were the young stri-party boys whose homoerotic exploitation has been strongly hinted at by theatre historians, though predictably without actual details. Boys were an important segment of the cast: good-looking boys who could sing were groomed for important female roles, and were pampered. Once their voices broke, they became useless unless they underwent rigorous training. Mujumdar of 'Kirloskar' was fond of inserting song and dance numbers of stri-party boys into existing plays as an additional attraction. He concluded *Manapaman* with such boys dancing with a long garland of flowers which they then held up to spell the play's title.[43] The available surplus of boys was made to do a variety of additional

[41] *Ibid*., p 48.

[42] Satish Bahadur and Shyamala Vanarase, 'The Personal and Professional Problems of a Woman Performer', *Cinema Vision India*: *The Indian Journal of Cinematic Art*, Vol. 1, No. 1, January 1980, pp. 22–25.

[43] V. Shantaram was one of these boys; V. [Vanakudre] Shantaram, *Shantarama* (narrated to Madhura Jasraj), Mumbai: Kiran Shantaram, 1986, pp. 22–24.

chores, from playing the tanpura in the wings to making copies of a new play-script and writing out in large letters posters advertising forthcoming attractions.[44]

Major companies like 'Kirloskar' ensured the general well-being of these boys, educated them by engaging a teacher, and made them sing their evening prayers regularly. But Lele mentions that Mujumdar thought it necessary to keep an eye on the teacher, 'for a reason best left to the imagination'.[45] What happened in less well-run companies is not difficult to guess; besides, there are references to some teachers seen fondly stroking the backs of young stri-party boys.[46] In low-status companies, boys were frequently initiated into 'lax and immoral behaviour' by older actors or patrons.[47]

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The fierce competition among theatre companies for the available acting – and especially singing – talent led to constant attempts to lure actors from one company to another. Breakaway factions of older companies formed their own companies in turn: being a proprietor–actor offered much greater financial stability than did working as an employee–actor on a monthly wage or a fixed fee per performance. Only the top actors had a fixed share in the company's profits.

The competition between 'Gandharva' and 'Lalitakala' was legendary. In Mumbai the two customarily performed at Elphinstone and Bombay Theatres, respectively, located opposite each other, and were patronised by partisan audiences.[48] Theatre lore speaks of some admirers of Gandharva who went to see Bhosale's *Saubhadra* in Pune with a view to creating a disturbance by throwing small snacks (*bhajiyas*) at him, but stayed to applaud him instead.[49]

Actors were routinely 'poached': an extreme case occurred in 1914 when about 25 actors left 'Lalitakala' and many of them were absorbed

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[44] Bodas, *Majhi Bhumika*, pp. 37, 58–59, 94, 96.

[45] Lele, *Natak-mandalichya Birhadi*, pp. 11–12.

[46] Guruji, 'Natakanchi Sthityantare', p. 18.

[47] Urmila Bhirdikar, 'Boys in Theatre', *Art Connect: The IFA Magazine*, Vol. 2, No. 2, July–December 2008, pp. 60–71.

[48] P.S. Kale, *Lalitakalechya Sahavasat*, Mumbai: B.V. Pendharkar, 1956, p. 19.

[49] *Ibid.*, p. 18.

by 'Gandharva'. In fact the practice of 'Gandharva' employing at a higher salary actors who had left 'Lalitakala' continued until 1931.[50] (In rare cases, even playwrights were abducted.)[51]

But such rivalry was overcome for a greater cause. An excellent example was the legendary joint or 'samyukta' *Manapaman* performed by these two companies for Gandhi's Tilak Swaraj Fund on 22 July 1921 at Mumbai's spacious Balivala Grand Theatre off Grant Road. Gandharva played Bhamini and Bhosale Dhairyadhar.[52] The tickets (ranging from an unusual high of Rs 100 to Rs 5) were sold out immediately and brought in Rs 16,800. The crowd outside the theatre matched in size the audience inside, and all the doors were left open to allow them to hear what they could – in the pre-microphone days. These hundreds of disappointed spectators, drenched in pouring rain, blocked the street completely so that trams on either side had to return from that point. The performance started at 7:30 p.m. and ended at 2:30 a.m. Incidentally, an earlier experiment in such a joint venture had failed because of a scene where the Brahmin Gandharva (as Vanamala) would have had to pick up the shoes of the non-Brahmin Bhosale (as Dhairyadhar). The inadvisability of this was forcefully argued by 'friends' to sway Gandharva. Interestingly, during this performance, Bhosale would not allow Gandharva – his senior by a couple of years – to touch his shoes, which resulted in a short tussle on stage.

By common consensus Bhosale as Dhairyadhar was much more highly acclaimed than Gandharva as Bhamini during this performance. One of Dhairyadhar's songs ('I cannot endure this humiliation') received seven encores.[53] Barrister M.K. Jaykar was prompted to comment that 'Bhosale had beaten Bal Gandharva hollow'.[54] (Lele deems Joglekar's earlier performances superior even to Bhosale's.) The success of the performance united the two inimical factions and

[50] *Ibid.*, p. 12.

[51] *Ibid.*, p. 18.

[52] Chapekar, *Smriti-dhan*, pp. 60–70. Gandhi was requested to come to the theatre to ceremonially accept the purse (without even making a speech), but refused on the grounds of having vowed never to enter a theatre. The money was conveyed to his Mumbai residence (p. 70).

[53] Kale, *Lalitakalechya Sahavasat*, pp. 33–35.

[54] Cited in Lele, *Natak-mandalichya Birhadi*, p. 16.

their admirers, and Bhosale offered to hold more such performances and share the profits, to bail Gandharva out of his heavy debt. The joint *Saubhadra* followed and the profit of Rs 9,000 was shared equally. (According to Chapekar, Bhosale bought a large diamond with his entire share, such being his lavish lifestyle; but it had a flaw which was inauspicious to the wearer, and Bhosale died shortly thereafter.)[55]

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Despite intense competition, the professionalism of top actors was legendary. Gandharva performed the opening show of *Manapaman* as scheduled in Mumbai, even though his first child, a daughter, had died the same day, as mentioned earlier. In 1927 he gave his usual alluring performance of the courtesan Vasantasena in *Mrichchha-katik* just a couple of days after the death of his oldest surviving daughter – an event which permanently saddened him.[56]

Bhosale lost his wife at Amravati during the severe influenza epidemic which kept the audiences away. Even so, the day after the tragedy he refused to cancel his show and played Subhadra for a 'loyal' audience of 27 which had braved adverse weather to hear him, and absolutely surpassed himself.[57] Chapekar had to undergo a similar ordeal in 1925 when his wife contracted typhoid. He visited her whenever he could while touring with his company. On receiving a telegram about her worsened condition he rushed from Satara to Pune immediately after a show, found her unconscious, and lost her within a day or so. But company responsibilities dragged him back to Satara and then to Kolhapur where he had to play Bhamini on the fifth day after her death. 'The duties of a stage actor are like those of a soldier on the battlefield', he concludes.[58] Another tragic incident was the sudden illness of Bhaurao Jadhav in Chapekar's company in 1926. At the end of a scene, Jadhav stumbled into the wings, collapsed, and had apoplectic fits. While a doctor attended to him, the play continued with another actor standing in for him, after an announcement to that

[55] Chapekar, *Smriti-dhan*, p. 76.
[56] Desai, *Balgandharva*, p. 138.
[57] Varerkar, *Maza Nataki Sansar*, pp. 331–33.
[58] Chapekar, *Smriti-dhan*, p. 134.

effect. Jadhav died a couple of hours after the show.[59] This loyalty to the company and the audiences offset the all too common internal intrigues and competition, cliques and ego clashes, as revealed by the memoirs of eminent actors and playwrights.



[59] *Ibid.*, pp. 148–49.

# 9
# The Theatre World

Parallel to the contents of drama evolved the structure that encased the performance. Within half a century street corners and other public open spaces, or halls of private residences, had made way for specially built playhouses equipped with drop curtains and even the basic machinery for special effects.

## Theatres and Stagecraft

The indispensability of the proscenium stage resulted in a proliferation of theatres in urban Maharashtra symbolising a new cultural sensibility. This transcultural import came from Britain: 'public' buildings hardly existed in precolonial Maharashtra – or elsewhere in India – because entertainment, like education, administration, and justice, was home-based or palace-based.[1]

Vishnudas performed his earliest plays in rudimentary surroundings. Almost three decades after his discovery and eager use of Mumbai's Grant Road Theatre, Kirloskar accessed Pune's solitary playhouse Purnanand (built in 1858) for his *Shakuntal*. It has vanished, together with the city's only other old playhouse, Anandodbhav, from both the cityscape and public memory; the other theatres in the city were built mostly between 1900 and 1920.

The only Maharashtrian company-owned theatre was Pune's prestigious 'Kirloskar' which was inaugurated with fanfare and speeches on an auspicious day in August 1909. This dream project of S.B. Mujumdar, originally estimated at Rs 25,000, escalated to almost three times the cost, pushing the company into debt. The stringent repayment measures caused internal dissension: five weekly shows

[1] This point has been discussed in Kosambi, *Crossing Thresholds*, pp. 8–9.

instead of the usual three, cancellation of the annual one-month holiday, and general frugality.[2] From a wider perspective dramatist Varerkar welcomed the theatre as a 'rightful home' essential for a large and successful company, to avoid exorbitant rents or unavailability of favoured theatres. Some Parsi companies of Mumbai built their own theatres (e.g., Ripon, Alfred, and Imperial) or entered into long-term rental arrangements: Mumbai's wealth and appreciative multicultural audiences ensured profits from regular shows; besides, success in Mumbai, the trend-setter, guaranteed success everywhere else. But Marathi theatre companies relied on tours. Varerkar repeatedly rues their mindset: short-sightedly spending money on a lavish lifestyle instead of investing in their own theatres. They travelled 'throughout Maharashtra from Gwalior to Gadag' performing the same 'new' play for three to five years, to escape the anxiety of securing fresh scripts.[3] Varerkar's recurrent phrase 'Gwalior to Gadag' traces the contours of the greater cultural Maharashtra, with Gwalior located currently in southern Madhya Pradesh and Gadag in north Karnataka. Another casualty of constant travel was permanent high-quality sets; the standard stage was 30 feet wide and 14 feet high (later reduced to about 10 feet), and stages in small towns or temporary rural structures necessitated changes in the sets. Mumbai's Bombay and Elphinstone Theatres were considered ideal; during their unavailability, Ripon Theatre's stage had to be reduced in width and height through broader flats for wings and black frill along the top edge.[4]

But Varerkar's justifiable complaint about constant touring as a deterrent to qualitative improvement in stagecraft is to be offset by a welcome fallout in the form of creating a widespread and cohesive audience with shared tastes in drama and stage music. It may not be generally recognised, but theatre was arguably the single largest element in sculpting the new Maharashtrian culture, more effective than journalism and literature, given the low levels of literacy.

In his magazine Mujumdar listed a total of 58 modern theatres in 'Maharashtra' in 1911.[5] Of these 10 were located in Mumbai, five in

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[2] Bodas, *Majhi Bhumika*, p. 140.

[3] Varerkar, *Maza Nataki Sansar*, p. 228.

[4] *Ibid*., pp. 212–13.

[5] S.B. Mujumdar, 'Maharashtratil Juni Navi Natak-grihe', *Rangabhumi*, 1911, pp. 6–7.

Pune, three each in Nagpur and Baroda.[6] He adds that the theatres in Surat, Ahmadabad, Karachi, and Banaras were of no use for Marathi plays: the general boundaries of the greater cultural Maharashtra were again clearly drawn. He also stresses that all these theatres, except six, were built after 1880, inspired by Kirloskar's musicals which obviously left a permanent imprint.

Mumbai had a practical surfeit of theatre performances. Desai describes a scenario in 1922 as a theatre festival. 'Gandharva' played at Elphinstone Theatre on Wednesday and Saturday evenings ('theatre evenings') and on Sunday afternoons. Across the street, Bombay Theatre was booked for Wednesday and Saturday evenings by 'Lalitakala', for some other evenings and Saturday mornings (for short plays) by 'Balwant', and on Sunday evening by an old lesser-known company. In between, amateur clubs staged their plays whenever possible.[7]

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The topography of Mumbai's 'theatre district' – the only such in Maharashtra – is interesting. It developed near the crossing of Grant Road (now Maulana Shaukat Ali Road which runs due east from Nana Chowk) and Falkland Road (now Paththe Bapurao Marg) which cuts across it from the northwest to the southeast towards Sandhurst Road (now Vallabhbhai Patel Marg, parallel to Grant Road). The main cluster of theatres lay to the south of Grant Road along Falkland Road. On the western side of their junction was Ripon (later Alfred) Theatre at the corner, with Elphinstone and New Royal to its south. On the opposite side of Falkland Road was situated Shankarshet's Grant Road Theatre (now Gulshan Talkies).[8]

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[6] Pune's theatres were Anandodbhav, Purnanand, Aryabhushan, Kirloskar, and Vijayanand. Additionally there were 2 each in Ahmadnagar, Akola, Amravati, Barsi, Bijapur, Dharwad, Hubli, Jalgaon, Nashik, Nipani, Pandharpur, and Solapur; and one each in Athani, Bagalkot Dhule, Gadag, Karad, Malkapur, Miraj, Parole, Sangli, Satara, Sankeshwar, Vardha, and Yerandol.

[7] Desai, *Makhamalicha Padada*, p. 61.

[8] I am grateful to Ms Aban Mukherji for accompanying me on an exploration of the theatre district. Later discussions with Mr Deepak Rao and Mr Rafique Baghdadi on the topic have also been useful. See also Rafique

The northern side of Grant Road was also lined with theatres: at the corner of Falkland Road was located Taj Theatre (later Victoria, now demolished), Coronation Theatre and Nishat Talkies; Royal Theatre lay on the southern side of Grant Road opposite them. On the eastern side of Falkland Road north of Grant Road was located Balivala Grand Theatre, built and largely used by Parsi companies, and the most expensive. The northwesterly continuation of Falkland Road crossed Foras Road which led to Kamathipura with its red-light area (supposedly the largest in India).

The stretch of Falkland Road south of Grant Road formed the core of the theatre district and was collectively known as the 'Playhouse', corrupted locally to Pil House or Pila House, and merged further down Falkland Road with the red-light area (of undated origin). (British theatres stood apart, like Gaiety Theatre in the Fort near the Chhatrapati Shivaji Railway Terminus, which now operates as Capitol Cinema.)

Interestingly this theatre enclave was sandwiched between the respectable Maharashtrian and Gujarati residential areas, with Grant Road at the northern end and Khetwadi at the southern. Thus the alleged fallout of immorality emanating from the theatre district was contained. In an interesting article, Kathryn Hansen dwells on the 'transgressive energies' from playhouses spilling out and sexually charging the adjoining area, as exemplified by Grant Road, far removed from the elite residences in the Fort.[9] Actually Grant Road in general has been and still remains a desirable residential area, except for this locality – which at times acquired the inclusive, unflattering label of 'Grant Road' but only in a theatrical context. This equivalence comes across in a solitary but illuminating farce of uncertain date, entitled *Sangit Mumbaicha Grant Road*, in which the anonymous author gives his two protagonists – a young local resident and his out-of-town visitor – a tour of this area.[10] The friends are jostled by crowds of ethnic diversity, and confronted with every distraction from huge coloured posters of plays with suggestive titles and a

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Baghdadi, 'Movie Theatres in the City of Bombay', Brochure of the MAMI Festival of Films, No. 24, Mumbai, 30 November 1997.

[9] Kathryn Hansen, 'Theatrical Transvestism in the Parsi, Gujarati and Marathi Theatres (1850–1940)', *South Asia*, Vol. 24, 2001, pp. 50–73.

[10] *Sangit Mumbaicha Grant Road*, Mumbai: Kshirsagar Company, Booksellers and Publishers (n.d.).

clown performing tricks, to houses inhabited by prostitutes in heavy make-up who are ogled by potential customers, and those occupied by male transvestites from North India. It is a place where 'the day dawns at night and it is night-time during the day'. It is tempting to suggest that southern Falkland Road was in a sense an extension of Kamathipura formed by leapfrogging over Grant Road in a southerly direction. Kamathipura (with its separate sections for European and Indian prostitutes) was already a source of anxiety for the city authorities since the 1890s.[11]

Such a conjunction of theatres and prostitution did not develop elsewhere. Pune, for example, had no identifiable 'theatre district', these being scattered in various *peth*s or wards of the 'old city'. The oldest playhouse, Purnanand, was a temporary structure erected in 1858 to accommodate 400 people in Shaniwar Peth – an elite locality immediately to the west of Shaniwar Wada, the Peshwa's chief palace. It was destroyed by fire and was reconstructed in early 1859 as a large tent that broke down in 1864. A proper playhouse was later built on the same site with the same name. In 1864 Anandodbhav Theatre was built in Budhwar Peth to its south.[12] Kirloskar Theatre (1909) had a prime location abutting the former mansion of Nana Phadnis immediately to the south of Shaniwar Wada; it became Vasant Talkies in the 1930s and has long fallen into disuse.[13] The only theatres in dubious neighbourhoods were Globe Theatre probably built after World War I near Mandai (the principal vegetable market now named after Mahatma Phule) and later transformed into Shrinath Chitra Mandir to screen films, and Vijayanand in Shukrawar Peth, at two ends of the red light district.

Vijayanand, built about 1890, was renovated in 1926–1927.[14] It was partially reconstructed as a cinema hall in 1956, sold by the owner's family in 1965, and eventually became defunct. The now empty

[11] Kenneth Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex and Class under the Raj: Imperial Attitudes and Policies and their Critics, 1793–1905*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980, pp. 125–37.

[12] Banahatti, *Marathi Rangabhumicha Itihas*, pp. 304–05.

[13] Most of my information about Pune's theatres comes from Mr Rajeev Paranjpe who took me on a tour and explained their history on 24 June 2012.

[14] Shantaram Athavale, *'Prabhat'kal*, Pune: Proficient Publishing House, 2013 (1965), p. 293.

shell, shorn even of furniture, is rendered even more desolate by a large peepul tree weaving in and out of one wall, propping it up.[15] Other walls show evidence of the original 30-foot stage and wings; the green-rooms stood on the upper floor. The owner's family lived in a house attached to the theatre building; a through passageway led from it to the upper gallery along the side of the theatre. Equally forlorn stands Bhanuvilas Theatre/Talkies. The date of its construction is not known, but legend ascribes its name to the character of Bhanumati in *Kulavadhu* which ran here to a packed house through September–October 1942. (The unused building was attached by the Income Tax Department some years ago and stands gloomily empty.) To its rear or west, Vijay Talkies (or Limaye Natya Chitra Mandir) in Sadashiv Peth stands near the north-western periphery of the old city sketched by the River Mutha.

A foray was made into the relatively modern residential locality of Deccan Gymkhana to the west beyond the river by the multi-purpose Deccan Talkies, perhaps in the 1930s and Hindvijay in the 1940s (where Gandharva's last, and unsuccessful, performance took place; this later changed ownership to become Nataraj Talkies). Both buildings have been demolished to make room for high-rise commercial complexes.

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The evolution of the sets and properties with the advent of playhouses was impressive. In the early years no curtains or painted scenes were used; a rough cloth at the rear of the stage was pushed aside to allow the entry and exit of actors. A small adjacent room in the house where the performance was held had to serve as a green room. In the absence of this, actors walked to the theatre from their lodgings in full make-up, moved through the audience, and climbed up on stage.[16]

The construction of theatres inevitably introduced internal structural changes. Initially the stage was blocked from view before and after a performance by a rolled-up curtain, as in Europe. This was probably introduced in the early 1860s. Kolhapurkar Mandali started

[15] I am grateful to Mr Abhay Jabade, a descendant of the original owner's family, for a tour of the theatre on 24 June 2012, arranged by Rajeev Paranjpe.

[16] Banahatti, *Marathi Rangabhumicha Itihas*, p. 306.

the vogue of painted show curtains in 1878.[17] The paintings on these varied: 'Gandharva' had a picture of Krishna and Radha (with a facial resemblance to Gandharva), Balwant Company's curtain showed Lakshmi and Saraswati. Excelsior Theatre, used by English companies, introduced a velvet curtain which was parted; the idea was adopted first by Keshavrao Bhosale in 1913.[18] It was copied by 'Yashawant' and in 1928 also by 'Gandharva'.[19]

Early years saw entire plays being staged with the help of a few standard painted scenes: a palace chamber, a forest, a garden, and a street scene; historical plays added a fort scene.[20]

The most famous scene painters with a good sense of perspective and ever-fresh colours were the cousins Anandrao and Baburao Mistry (who acquired 'Painter' as their surname) from Kolhapur. 'Lalitakala' had its scenes painted by Anandrao. Gandharva had specially invited Baburao to paint scenes for his *Draupadi* and other important plays.[21] Their informal disciple P.S. Kale was famed for his novel 'flat scenes' for modern social plays in the 1920s.[22] Kale's most successful scenes were seen in Varerkar's *Satteche Gulam*: these included a realistic-looking drawing room, a street scene, and a lawyer's office. But more popular was the scene of Vaikunth's fields and hut at Chembur, which drew a spontaneous applause from the audience.[23] As enthusiastically applauded – but potentially troublesome – was a view of Princess Street in South Mumbai (where the character of Nurse Rewa lived), which clearly showed all the buildings and even a store, and sparked instant recognition. This almost backfired. There happened to be a nurse named Rewa actually staying in one of these buildings and a lawyer in search of clients instigated her to sue the playwright for defamation. The case was dropped when the company responded that the nurse in the play was shown as a respectable and even noble woman and if this seemed defamatory, the lawyer was free to persist.[24]

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[17] *Ibid.*
[18] Kale, *Lalitakalechya Sahavasat*, p. 10.
[19] Desai, *Makhamalicha Padada*, pp. 150–51.
[20] P.S. Kale, *Rangabhumivaril Nepathya*, Pune: Vinas Prakashan, 1968, p. 2.
[21] *Ibid.*, p. 27.
[22] Desai, *Makhamalicha Padada*, pp. 60, 70–71.
[23] Kale, *Rangabhumivaril Nepathya,* pp. 13–14, 22.
[24] Kale, *Lalitakalechya Sahavasat*, pp. 48–51.

Actual trick effects were largely absent on the Marathi stage, although attempts in the direction were made quite early. In 1856 Amarchand-vadikar advertised 'marvels' such as Vishnu reclining on a huge serpent (probably made of papier mache).[25] In Khadilkar's *Sawai Madhavrao Yancha Mrityu*, the Peshwa is shown going in procession, seated on an elephant. Throughout the scene Madhavrao remained seated on an artificial elephant which did not move. While critiquing this as disappointing and detrimental to dramatic effect, P.S. Kale suggests that such artificial devices should be displayed only briefly to ensure a better effect.[26]

Fire and water also posed problems. In *Thorle Madhavrao Peshwe* (1865) the last sati scene showed the requisite square hole with clay edges, in which a fire was lit, with flames continuously flaring up.[27] Gadkari's *Prem-sannyas* also ends with Leela's burning funeral pyre near which Jayant takes his oath; how this was shown is not known.

Decades later in Kolhatkar's *Vadhu-pariksha*, the top of a well was shown on stage. When Triveni and then Dhurandhar jumped into the well, there were thuds followed by splashes of water. The applause was doubled when a wet Dhurandhar emerged from the steps of the well carrying an equally wet Triveni.[28] While describing this, Kale does not tell us how this was achieved, but presumably the top part of the wall of the 'well' was constructed at the rear edge of the stage and a tub filled with water was placed in a hollow beneath the stage level. Whether this arrangement could be replicated in theatres outside Mumbai is not known.

Incidentally wet women in clinging clothes (an ever-green topic for Marathi erotic poetry) were a great attraction. The most popular scene in Gandharva's *Mrichchha-katik* was in Act IV when Vasantasena is drenched in a downpour on her way to a garden tryst with Charudatta. Special sprinklers were fitted above the stage to show 'her' in semi-transparent wet clothes. Spectators flocked to the play just for this scene.[29] Other companies were compelled to follow suit, and Tembe admits to having committed this 'folly' in his

[25] Banahatti, *Marathi Rangabhumicha Itihas*, pp. 177–79.
[26] Kale, *Rangabhumivaril Nepathya*, p. 40.
[27] *Ibid.*, pp. 308–09.
[28] Kale, *Lalitakalechya Sahavasat*, p. 90.
[29] Kale, *Rangabhumivaril Nepathya*, p. 24.

Shivraj Company. For the stage manager it was a headache: the pipe arrangement was expensive, the water and slush on the stage had to be mopped up quickly, and both Vasantasena and Charudatta usually came down with a cold.[30] (In order to rectify the latter problem, Bharat Natya Mandir of Pune installed in later years a hot-water boiler on a gallery above the stage so that a man perched up there could use a watering pot with a sprinkler spout to sprinkle warm water on the actors below. This method, however, was not foolproof, because once the sprinkler head fell off and almost hit Vasantasena.)[31]

But given the standard dimensions of the stage, some scenes were practically impossible to show, as for example the opening scene of Gadkari's *Raj-sannyas.* P.S. Kale who saw the play half a dozen times was pained by the practical problems which sometimes quite ruined the effect. When Sambhajiraje, with his admiral and other companions, stood on a bastion (necessarily reduced to a five-foot height), their headgear reached the horizontal top frill; Tulashi and her friend stood just a few feet away supposedly at the shore of the stormy sea. He describes the occasional debacles:

> Once Sambhaji, carried away by his impassioned speech, jumped down, but his foot was caught in the flat of the bastion and he fell down, with the bastion diving into the sea after him. Afraid of losing his balance, the admiral clutched at the frill above. Indignant at this outrageous assault, it repulsed him outright letting him grab only a small torn piece in his hand . . . With great presence of mind, the stage manager blew his whistle and covered up the scene with a drop curtain.[32]

At the other extreme were attempts to introduce realism by overindulging the taste for attractive scenes. Gandharva Company's sets, props, curtains, and costumes were allegedly drawn from Raja Ravi Varma's mythological paintings. Such was Gandharva's concern for realistic and impressive sets that he once attempted – unsuccessfully – to bring on stage real cows for the last scene of *Svayamvar* to recreate Krishna's 'gokul'; ultimately he had to settle for wooden cutouts.[33]

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[30] Tembe, *Maza Jivan-vihar*, p. 111.

[31] Personal communication from Rajeev Paranjpe, trustee of Bharat Natya Mandir.

[32] Kale, *Rangabhumivaril Nepathya*, p. 44.

[33] Nadkarni, *Balgandharva and the Marathi Theatre*, pp. 71–72.

Later he insisted on replicating the Viththal temple of Pandharpur for his *Sant Kanhopatra* at the cost of almost Rs 10,000.[34]

The lighting arrangements underwent significant changes. Hanging oil lamps and candles were replaced by kerosene lamps in 1875.[35] In the 1890s footlights were made up of a row of 30 to 40 small shaded kerosene lamps placed along the front edge of the stage. About three Dietmar lights (line 40) were hung from the top to provide 'more light than was seen even in wealthy houses'. A wooden board was lowered in front of these lights to provide darkness when scenes were to be changed.[36] Later came the more powerful Kitson lights. But electric lights and spotlights was a post-Independence development.

Sound management kept pace. Voice projection was initially part of a vocalist's requisite skill, and by all accounts, songs could be heard reasonably well outside a theatre in the pre-microphone days.

Through all these changes, the dramatists' viewing of the staging of their creations varied. Some playwrights, such as Khadilkar, Kolhatkar, and Atre, sat in the audience to watch the first performance; Varerkar had an 'author's hole' pierced in one of the wings from which he gauged audience reactions.

## Stage Music

Bringing classical (or semi-classical, according to purists) music within the purview of the common theatre-goer was Kirloskar's greatest – and lasting – achievement; to him can be attributed its popularity that has percolated into many sections of Maharashtrian society.[37] Generations of music students have identified ragas by stage songs and the first lines of many have passed into everyday usage.[38] New musical plays still emerge once in a while and are heavily patronised.[39]

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[34] Kale, *Rangabhumivaril Nepathya*, pp. 33, 35.

[35] Ashok D. Ranade, *Stage Music of Maharashtra*, New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi, 1986, p. 4.

[36] Varerkar, *Maza Nataki Sansar*, p. 29.

[37] Ranade, *Stage Music*; also personal discussions with him.

[38] The wide popularity of stage music is reflected, for example, in Kashibai Kanitkar's novel *Rangarao* [Pune: A.V. Patwardhan, 1931 (1903)] where the hero hums a song from Kirloskar's *Saubhadra* (p. 307) and his future wife sings one from *Ram-Rajya-Viyog* (p. 303).

[39] The latest of these is *Avagha Ranga Ekachi Zala* (2007) with Prasad Sawkar, son of the famous female impersonator Raghuvir Sawkar and now in his mid-80s, as the lead singer with young Ajay Bavdekar.

Kirloskar-style plays became the only source of classical music (and respectable entertainment) in an era devoid of radio, gramophone, cinema, and television. The music of the Vishnudas-style plays, though raga-based, was relatively simple and hardly made an impact, drowned out as it was by the action. Classical concerts were held privately by the wealthy elite and accessed only by a privileged few. Music clubs and circles had a small outreach. Besides, pure classical music in its elaborate form was too intricate for the common man to understand. Stage music was its simplified version and made lyrics attractive and hummable; they instantly became as popular as Hindi film songs are today. Thus S.K. Kolhatkar valorises Kirloskar for having brought classical music from *mehfil*s within the reach of ordinary people. After Kirloskar's death, musical theatre companies employed trained singers as music directors: 'Gandharva' had Bhaskarbuva Bakhale (of the Agra and Jaipur Gharanas or schools) and Govindrao Tembe (of the Jaipur Gharana); both 'Lalitakala' and 'Balwant' had Ramkrishnabuva Vaze (Gwalior Gharana).[40] Gandharva and Bhosale were the chief protagonists of two singing styles. Gandharva chose 'subtler shades of controlled eroticism and melodiousness'. By contrast, Bhosale's style was marked by 'an unmistakable flash and aggression' and was emulated by Dinanath with 'his extraordinary voice and imaginative singing'.[41]

A symbiotic relationship existed between singer–actors and classical singers. Lalitakala's Ganesh festival in 1922 was celebrated in style with the concerts of Vazebuva, Mogubai Kurdikar, Sawai Gandharva, and Vishnupant Pagnis (then a music teacher in a municipal school).[42]

The roots of Vishnudas's as well as Kirloskar's music have been traced to the simple and emotionally expressive akhyan of a kirtan. Kirloskar occasionally performed kirtans which in fact have been regarded as one-man dramatic shows.[43] The kirtan also ensured a smooth transition from a prose segment to song, and made the process acceptable in plays. The best actors of the musical stage shared the talent for making the transition without disrupting the flow of the speech or the emotion it evoked. Durga Khote describes how

[40] Ranade, *Stage Music*, p. 15.
[41] *Ibid.*, pp. 69, 76.
[42] Desai, *Makhamalicha Padada*, p. 68.
[43] Kulkarni, *Sangit Saubhadra*, p. 239.

Gandharva skilfully ended his dialogue on a note that would be carried over into the ensuing song without even a second's pause and without waiting for the musical accompaniment which started a split second later.[44]

Kirloskar's songs were sung elaborately, albeit with a full awareness of their being a component of the play so that the words were clearly enunciated to convey their meaning. Excessive elaboration of a raga was initially discouraged, and occasional lapses were immediately critiqued by newspaper reviewers. Also, each actor acted out the song and the other characters on stage responded suitably, showing their involvement in the song as part of the action. (The severely critiqued tendency of making a musical play into a 'standing jalsa', obviously detrimental to its dramatic quality, was a later development.) Additionally, Kirloskar took into consideration the timbre of each singer's voice while setting lyrics to tunes.

Musical versatility was another of Kirloskar's contributions. Almost half the songs in *Shakuntal* and *Saubhadra* use the Marathi verse metres or 'recitation moulds' (arya, *saki*, *dindi*, katav, *phatka*, etc.) as well as popular devotional tunes; they are deployed for straightforward narration of events and expressing simple ideas. The rest are divided almost equally between raga-based melodies (though sung in the *thumri*-style rather than expansively) and popular Marathi as well as Hindi, Kannada, and Gujarati tunes (given a Marathi slant through touches of the lavani mode of singing).[45] This confluence of musical styles and traditions became a hallmark of stage music.

Common consensus characterises the Kirloskar–Deval era (1880–1895) as founding the classical tradition which was a musical conflation offering something for every taste – verse metres, women's songs, even lavani tunes, and a few familiar ragas. A rupture was caused by the Kolhatkar era (1896–1910) with a pursuit of novelty through a large-scale borrowing from the Parsi (Urdu and Gujarati) theatre.[46] Tembe labels this transformation 'a religious conversion of stage music'.[47] Kolhatkar freely admits to borrowing catchy tunes

[44] Khote, *Mi – Durga Khote*, pp. 47–48.

[45] Kulkarni, *Sangit Saubhadra*, pp. 249–51; Ranade, *Stage Music*, p. 58; Tembe, *Jivan Vysanga*, p. 126.

[46] Vaman Hari Deshpande, 'Dusarya Avrittichi Prastavana' in Tembe, *Maza Sangit-vyasang*, pp. xxviii–xliv.

[47] Tembe, *Jivan-vyasang*, p. 131.

from Parsi plays – which he watched innumerable times. (In his *Vir-tanaya*, 88 out of 104 tunes are taken from Parsi Gujarati plays, six are verse metres, and the remaining 10 from other Marathi plays.)[48] When he wanted a specific Parsi tune, he received help from his brother, then a medical student in Mumbai, who would go with a fellow student to stand outside Ripon Theatre at the appropriate time of the evening, hear the song again, commit the tune to memory, and convey it later to the playwright.[49] The reception of Kolhatkar's 'revolutionary' initiative was mixed. Govindrao Tembe is outspoken in his critique: 'It was Kolhatkar who first planted the thorny sapling of the Urdu-Gujarati tunes [from Parsi theatre] on the stage of Kirloskar Company'.[50] Marathi regional pride and musical taste were obviously ruffled by this import.

In 1910 Khadilkar (the first dramatist unschooled in music) requested Tembe to provide tunes for the lyrics in his *Manapaman*; this wrought a revolution because while restoring the tradition Tembe also introduced North Indian classical music as sung by the likes of Moujuddin, Gauhar Jan, and Malka Jan. Not only has Tembe been credited with having saved the play solely through his music; he has also been hailed as 'the sculptor of Marathi stage music'.[51] (Incidentally, with the sudden death of Kirloskar Company's Joglekar in 1911, Tembe – a handsome well-educated man with a law degree from Kolhapur – became its new lead singer–actor, and was acclaimed for his role of Kacha in Khadilkar's *Sangit Vidya-haran* in 1913.)

Tembe had risen to fame as an expert harmonium player: he was the first to use it as a solo musical instrument rather than accompaniment. While selecting tunes for a play he had to follow Kirloskar's model and match a tune to the timbre and age of the singer and the gender of the character (aggressive ragas for a male character and soft, gentle ones for a female), as also a particular raga suited to the diegetic time of the day (rather than the actual time).

The borrowing of Hindustani tunes eventually reached vast proportions and involved linguistic acrobatics to write Marathi lyrics to match the exact syllables of the original. Vishram Bedekar who had

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[48] Ranade, *Stage Music*, p. 55.
[49] Kolhatkar, *Atma-vritta*, p. 27.
[50] Tembe, *Maza Sangit-vyasang*, p. 41.
[51] Cited in Deshpande, 'Dusarya Avrittichi Prastavana', p. xxxiii.

to write songs for his *Brahmakumari*, to be performed by 'Balwant' in 1933, says:

> One had to take an original Hindi-Urdu lyric (*cheez*) and achieve its 'religious conversion' into Marathi, which was far from easy. Then one had to wield a sword like the Muslims of yore. The exact number and type of syllables – short for short and long for long – were to be hammered into the Marathi line. It was the poet's good fortune if all this finally made sense!

Bedekar also cites awkwardly constructed lyrics by the likes of Khadilkar and N.C. Kelkar in the same effort.[52] Writing lyrics for musical plays needed a special talent. Even a good poet could not necessarily write good lyrics, as shown by Gadkari's *Punya-prabhav*. Also the selection of the right spots for songs needed special skill.[53]

The most legendary of the singing stars was Bhaurao Kolhatkar of whom Tembe says: 'It was as if a sharp but delightful gold wire penetrated both ears and went straight to the heart – such was the brilliance and sweetness of his voice. It was as sharp as it was brilliant, as far-reaching as it was elastic'.[54] It spanned three octaves with ease, and his trills were like flashes of lightning. Such was his voice projection that he could be heard at a furlong's distance outside the theatre. About his death Tembe comments: 'I felt that Marathi plays will now be performed in twilight instead of sunlight, and I still feel the same'.[55]

A few years later came Gandharva, Dinanath, and Bhosale, each with his own partisans. The length of their stage songs has long been a matter of debate. Initially Gandharva's songs – as timed by the actor Chapekar out of personal interest – lasted from a minute and a half to eight minutes (or 14 minutes, with one encore), and were accompanied by a harmonium and a tabla. But with a considerably enlarged accompaniment and encores, his songs could last up to 45 minutes each.[56]

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[52] Vishram Bedekar, *Ek Zad ani Don Pakshi*, Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1984, p. 56.

[53] Desai, *Makhamalicha Padada*, p. 145.

[54] Tembe, *Maza Sangit-vyasang*, p. 32.

[55] *Ibid.*, p. 37.

[56] Chapekar, *Smriti-dhan*, pp. 17–18.

Musical accompaniment initially comprised a tanpura to provide a drone with the basic notes and a tabla for rhythm; these were placed in one of the wings. The tanpura was replaced by a harmonium in the wings some time about 1882.[57] In 1910 the musical accompanists were moved from the wings – because of Gandharva's defective hearing – to the specially created Western-style orchestra pit in front of the stage. Later Gandharva replaced the harmonium with a reed organ, adding first one sarangi (the string instrument which replicates the human voice most closely) and then two.

This was also a time for imitation. Tunes of famous songs were routinely lifted by other playwrights: Varerkar alleges that Deval's *Sharada* had many tunes borrowed from *Vir-tanaya*.[58] When Bhosale did not have permission to stage *Manapaman* (1911), he lifted from the play at least six tunes for *Rakshasi Mahattvakanksha* (1913), for which Vir Joshi then wrote lyrics to match.[59] Over time, finding tunes for songs became an obsession and the original integrality of music suffered. Desai describes how, in 1927–1928, tunes for the lyrics in his play were given by various 'experts', involving incessant alterations. Frustratingly enough, Desai wrote almost 100 lyrics, of which the requisite number were selected and their placement repeatedly changed.[60]

One indispensable source of classical tunes was the famous North Indian singers, as mentioned. A revealing anecdote tells of the encounter between Gandharva and the renowned Hindustani singer 'Gauhar Jan of Calcutta' during her brief sojourn in Mumbai about 1903. Having invited her to attend one of his performances, he had her escorted to his dressing room during one of the intervals as an honoured guest, in a customary gesture. When he eagerly solicited her valued opinion about his singing, she retorted that she had nothing to say because after all, he had been singing all *her* songs. (That the same response is attributed to other North Indian singers, including Malka Jan, substantiates the large-scale importation of Hindustani singing styles and tunes to the Marathi stage.)

More colour was added to this eastern–western Indian encounter by the exotic ancestry of Gauhar Jan (1873–1930) which makes a

[57] Ranade, *Stage Music*, p. 58.
[58] Varerkar, *Maza Nataki Sansar*, pp. 56–57.
[59] Kanade, *Kalche Natakakar*, pp. 47–48.
[60] Desai, *Makhamalicha Padada*, p. 140.

fascinating digression.[61] In her person intersected many racial, religious, and cultural streams. Born Eileen Angelina Yeoward to the Armenian engineer William Robert Yeoward and the British Victoria Henning (born and brought up in India, and well-versed in Indian music and dance), she spent her early years near Banaras. Her parents' marriage ended soon, largely because of Victoria's fascination for Indian dance and music, and her relationship with a Muslim musician. Victoria (now 'Badi Malka Jan', the oldest of the four famous Malka Jans of North India), left with Angelina (now Gauhar) to live with the musician, and eventually reached Calcutta about 1883. Adept in music (as well as several Indian and European languages), Gauhar attracted an affluent elite with her performances, and amassed great wealth and popularity. She was the first singer to record Indian classical music in 1902 for the 'Gramophone Company' founded in England four years earlier. By 1920 she had recorded over 600 songs in more than 10 languages; each three-minute recording ending with her oral signature, 'My name is Gauhar Jan', to facilitate identification when the wax master-record was sent to Germany to press and label shellac copies. Gauhar Jan's records brought her pan-Indian publicity and even greater wealth: for her first recording session in 1902 she had charged a fee of Rs 3,000. She was invited to sing at the Delhi Durbar in 1911, and travelled throughout the subcontinent enjoying the patronage of princely states. Her brief Maharashtrian connection was her relationship with the Gujarati stage actor Amrut Nayak based in Mumbai, which followed her failed marriage. His unexpected death devastated and destabilised her. She died years later in Mysore where she enjoyed state patronage.

## The Making of Actors and Playwrights

The stereotype of a young boy running away to join a theatre company exactly fitted Ganpatrao Bodas (1880–1965), as described in his autobiography.[62] Ganpat's father had also run away in boyhood

[61] Vikram Sampath, *'My Name is Gauhar Jaan!': The Life and Times of a Musician*, New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2011 (2010); Suresh Chandvankar, '"My Name is Gauhar Jan": First Dancing Girl, Calcutta', 16 November 2002, http://www.mustrad.org.uk/articles/gauhar.htm. As accessed on 10 May 2013.

[62] Bodas, *Majhi Bhumika.*

to join a theatre company but was brought back, made to continue his schooling, and take up a job. After his early death, his widow took their son and two daughters to Pune where young Ganpat got a freeship in school through influential contacts. He had his meals with certain Brahmin families by turn, which was a customary way of helping poor Brahmin students. His mother was compelled to work as a cook.

During these school years, Ganpat got involved in a series of amateur theatre groups and even performed a female role in a nearby town. Agents of theatre companies were always on the lookout for promising stri-party boys, and Ganpat was recruited by Goa Sangit Mandali. Overcoming her initial shock and dismay, his mother reconciled herself to his obsession and arranged for him to join Kirloskar Company in 1895, ensuring the best possible future for him. The incensed proprietor of Goa Company sued him on a false charge of theft, which could not be proved.

In Kirloskar Company, Ganpat played secondary female roles, Bhaurao being the hegemonic heroine. Boys like him were required to do lowly chores, such as dismantling and reassembling stage props, and playing the tanpura in the wings by turn when not required on stage. His good handwriting invited on him extra work such as making copies of the text of a new play and writing large posters advertising shows. Although not formally trained in music, Ganpat managed female roles which required singing. At about 20 he started on minor male roles – sometimes even three small roles in three different acts of the same play.

Marriage was a difficult proposition those days for actors, a socially despised class. Long absences from home, addiction to liquor and drugs, and visiting prostitutes were part of their lifestyle. However, Kirloskar Company was considered exceptional because of the respect Kirloskar had personally enjoyed and because of his friends in elite circles. Bodas married in 1905 when his salary had risen to Rs 25 a month. He also ascended the hierarchy to important roles, such as Krishna in *Saubhadra.*

In 1913, Gandharva, Tembe, and Bodas left 'Kirloskar' and started Gandharva Company. The three partners and the manager Pandit (possessive about Gandharva) divided their shares of the profit: 7 annas out of a rupee for Gandharva, 5 for Tembe, 3 and ½ for Bodas, and ½ anna for charity. With Tembe's early departure, Bodas's share rose to 6 annas. In 1919 Bodas left the company mainly because of

Pandit's financial mismanagement. The following year he accepted the post of the general manager in Holkar's Yashwant Company but left within a year because of its irregular functioning. He rejoined Gandharva Company for most of 1921 and then again in 1928, but left after almost four years because of what he perceived as Gandharva's insincere behaviour, deceptive promises, and unrestrained expenditure. Later he worked sporadically on stage either to oblige friends or under financial compulsion; he also acted in two films. His hobby was to help professional or amateur theatre companies to direct and rehearse plays, and he claims to have trained at least a hundred actors and actresses. During later years he also recorded dialogues and songs for the radio.

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A very different route was traversed by Nanasaheb Chapekar, transforming his musical inclination into an excellent career as a singing stri-party actor.[63] Music had provided a pervasive context to his daily life in Pune since childhood at the turn of the 20th century. The flow of street life set the rhythm with the devotional songs of religious mendicants and beggars. Festivals in honour of deities like Ganesh brought in singing troupes. At the 'modern' extreme were the newly arrived gramophone records, and the occasional ticketed public concerts by Abdul Karim Khan and V.D. Paluskar.

But the greatest source of music was the stage. Chapekar was first exposed to it in childhood through Natyakala-pravartak Company's *Harishchandra*, adapted from an eponymous Parsi Urdu play. The curtain opened on a stage illuminated by the mild glow of kerosene footlights, and two lamps hung from the top, heightening the magical effect of Indra's durbar – where this king of the gods sat on the highest white cloud, with lesser gods and sages seated on rows of clouds in descending order. The open space in front of the clouds was briefly claimed by dancing 'celestial beauties'. The ensuing heated argument between the sages Vishwamitra and Vashishtha about Harishchandra's integrity frightened the lad in the audience. To his relief the story came down to earth in the next scene with the king's durbar. But then Vishwamitra appeared in person to demand Harishchandra's kingdom and possessions, drove him out with his

[63] Chapekar, *Smriti-dhan*.

wife and son, and subjected them to various torments, while the boy gave way to his grief in a flood of tears.

Subsequently Chapekar had occasion to see other plays. He had taught himself to sing and play the harmonium. He sang for family and friends, but assiduously refused requests to act women's parts in school plays because of the ridicule it invariably invited. Music continued to bring joy into his life. As a student of Fergusson College, he frequently joined friends from Deccan College in their informal moonlight concerts – on board boats anchored midstream in the river that ran past.

Having failed his BA the first time, Chapekar took up a temporary job while planning to reappear for the examination. (He passed at the third attempt in 1923.) Aware that actors – as opposed to actor–proprietors – earned a meagre and irregular income (a risk for a middle-class man with family responsibilities), he repulsed the persistent attempts made to lure him to the theatre. He joined the amateur club 'Hind Natak Samaj', to play the heroine Swarajya-sundari in the eponymous play. This was a political adaptation of *Svayamvar*, in which Dadabhai Naoroji appeared as a ghost. (Two ghosts are said to have haunted Marathi theatre at the time – this one and Hamlet's father's ghost in the play's Marathi adaptation.)

Here Chapekar earned Rs 20 per night, which would translate into almost Rs 200 per month. His second play, also political, was *Vir-kumari* (A Brave Young Woman); this was seen by Lokamanya Tilak who handed him the club's gold medal. Soon Bhosale, in his quest for a good singing stri-party, attracted him to his company at Rs 150 per month (to be raised to Rs 200 after six months) and an advance of Rs 2,000. Chapekar joined the company in April 1921 and nervously played a female character opposite Bhosale. But he achieved such success that in about 1922 an English actress from a visiting troupe, who came to see his performance, complimented him profusely afterwards, exclaiming: 'I can't believe you are a man!'[64]

Bhosale arranged for Chapekar's formal musical training under Vaze-buwa. He played the secondary role of Bhamini's sister in the famed 'joint Gandharva–Bhosale' *Manapaman* in July the same year. But Bhosale unfortunately died in October 1921. By the terms of his will, Pendharkar and Chapekar inherited the company jointly. Chapekar alleges that Pendharkar duped him with a double set

[64] *Ibid.*, p. 103.

of accounts. Chapekar left the company in 1924 and declined three later offers to rejoin. The company closed down in 1937.

Chapekar was soon invited to take over the almost defunct Kirloskar Company which he bought with borrowed money. He ran it for a few years despite legal hurdles placed in his way by Mujumdar – one of these led to the company's name being suddenly changed to 'Natyadarsha Sangit Mandali' to evade a warrant. But the patronage extended by Kolhapur State under a new dispensation ended in the state practically taking over the company's assets and even suing Chapekar.

Interestingly, in the late 1920s Chapekar had tried, unsuccessfully, to induct actresses into his company, especially Gauhar Jan Karnataki (who acted in Kannada plays under the name Gauri; and later joined 'Gandharva' in about 1937) and her older sister Amir Jan.

Music, the soul of Kirloskar-style theatre, gradually exercised hegemony over acting. Gandharva's songs could stretch to great lengths. On one occasion he started a devotional song in *Sant Kanhopatra* at 2 a.m., with his eyes closed as if in a trance. Chapekar, the company owner responsible for concluding the show by 2:30 a.m., was unable to stop him. Finally, at 2:15 a.m., he nudged Gandharva from behind the drop curtain, startling him into opening his eyes. Seeing the frantic signal from the wings, Gandharva wound up the song and the remaining dialogue – with another devotional song – in 10 minutes.[65]

In 1940 Chapekar accepted the offer to buy Gandharva Company, but left after a six-month stint. He then left professional theatre and essayed many other forms of entertainment. First he set up a company to perform short plays, later tried his hand at exhibiting short silent films, worked for the Odeon recording company, and finally served as a translator and announcer in the Marathi news section of All-India Radio's Delhi station from 1942 onward. In 1949 he was transferred to Mumbai and retired two years later. During these years he managed to stage and act in amateur theatre shows. In 1962 he was the president of the Marathi Natya Sammelan held at Nagpur.[66]

The career path of a playwright did not run smooth either, although ambitious theatre companies, ever eager for new fare to alternate

[65] *Ibid.*, pp. 219–20.
[66] *Ibid.*

with proven successes, tried to convert any literary talent into drama. Plays were frequently written specifically at a company's request even by high profile writers. But an amateur playwright's struggle for recognition was an agonising experience, judging from Varerkar's self-narrative intentionally scripted as a chronicle of theatre history.[67]

Nurtured on plays since early childhood, Varerkar had penned his first one at eight, and after seeing numerous performances and getting acquainted with theatre troupes, learnt the technique by trial and error. He wrote his first real play, *Kunjavihari* (1908), at 25 when he was a postal clerk in the Ratnagiri-Malvan area in south Konkan, supporting an extended family of eight on a monthly salary of Rs 30. The play so excited his friends that one of them approached 'Kirloskar' with it. Mujumdar liked the play but turned it down because the author was an unknown entity and not a college graduate. But 'Swadesh' whose members he knew well personally agreed to stage it. The casting of the play proved unexpectedly difficult because of the high turnover of actors and the paucity of stri-party singers. This necessitated adjustments that disturbed the spirit and intent of the theme. Internal politics and conflicts threatened to end the company's existence at one point. After these delays started the lengthy daily rehearsals for about five months; these involved clear enunciation, acting to match the lines, learning the lyrics and tunes. (Not believing songs to be integral to a play, Varerkar had kept them to a 'minimum' of about 70.) The tendency of the singers to neglect acting as unimportant had to be curbed. After all this, Varerkar had to rejoin his duties at his post office, having exhausted his three-month leave – and was unable to attend the opening night at the end of December 1908. (He saw it only a year later.) Nor did he have much luck with its publication; the company's owner–manager Nimkar did not wish to share the material. The advertisement his friends had placed in *Kesari* had misspelt his name beyond recognition. But the play was such a success that 'Swadesh' performed only this play for a whole season and earned Rs 1,000 per performance even in the small towns of Vidarbha. Unfortunately the playwright received no payment whatsoever.

While Varerkar wrote his second play, *Sanjivani*, Nimkar (who 'divided and ruled' the company), kept him under strict watch at

[67] Varerkar, *Maza Nataki Sansar*, scattered references. Specific page references are provided where necessary.

the company's lodgings lest some acquaintance entice him away. Such an attempt was in fact made by an aristocrat of Indore when the company performed there: he wanted Varerkar to sell both his plays to 'Lalitakala' (because of his fondness for 'Keshya') for the sumptuous amount of Rs 1,500. Varerkar's refusal so infuriated the aristocrat that he was ready to whip him. Having heard the episode, Nimkar increased his surveillance to the extent of locking Varerkar in his room when he himself had to go out. At another time Varerkar was actually abducted by a rival company.[68]

This control was unusual in degree, but not in occurrence. Gadkari was similarly placed almost under house arrest by Mujumdar when he was writing *Punya-prabhav* for 'Kirloskar' in about 1913. When Gadkari wanted to accept Varerkar's earnest invitation to visit Malvan, Mujumdar demanded either the complete play or the sum of Rs 110 that had been advanced to him. Having received help from Varerkar's friends, Gadkari flung the money at him and walked out. During the short visit Gadkari saw the coastal Sindhudurg fort and was so impacted by its historic associations and scenic beauty that he opened his later *Raj-sannyas* with the main characters grouped on the fort's bastion above a stormy sea.[69]

Varerkar had trustingly signed off the rights for his first two plays to Nimkar. Other playwrights displayed business acumen in varying degrees. B.P. Kirloskar was exceptionally generous about allowing others to perform his plays. Khadilkar first raised the playwright's status: he sold the monopoly of his prose plays to Maharashtra Natak Mandali for Rs 1,500 each, and charged Kirloskar Company Rs 3,000 for his musical *Manapaman*. But retaining the copyright and charging a fee for every performance (proportionate to the company's capacity) was Deval's idea: he thus earned thousands on his *Sharada*, and bought an estate near Sangli and aptly named it 'Sharada-bag'.

A play underwent many changes from its conception to staging. V.S. Desai started on a play at Gandharva's insistence and completed it in five days in 1927. This *Vidhi-likhit* (Predestined) was a 'short' three-hour play with 15 songs in three one-scene acts. Gandharva insisted that the songs be increased to 40 which necessitated new

[68] Kale, *Lalitakalechya Sahavasat*, p. 17.
[69] Varerkar, *Maza Nataki Sansar*, pp. 244–45.

scenes being inserted to please all singer–actors. The result was a five-hour play *sans* a compact structure.

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Pivotal to stage success was not only talent but importantly the actor–spectator equation. Actors like Gandharva or Bodas strove to feel the pulse of the audience and please them, eliciting a warm response. Joglekar, on the other hand, did not go out of his way to court audiences and failed to achieve the popularity he deserved, although his 'Dhairyadhar' was adjudged the best ever. Again, comparisons could be fatal. Joglekar succeeded the iconic Bhaurao, whereas Gandharva fortunately joined the company 10 years after Bhaurao had left it.[70]

The equation between actors, writers, and spectators was complex. A playwright was mandated – formally or informally – to write roles for specific actors. Bodas claims that his friction with Khadilkar led the latter to write mainly heroine-centred plays for Gandharva, overshadowing the male lead. The process, starting with *Svayamvar*, marked the gradual decline of drama, according to Bodas, because of the emphasis on music and neglect of acting.[71] Chapekar alleges that Varerkar wrote the role of Vaikunth in *Satteche Gulam* especially for Bapurao Pendharkar, making him heroic and ubiquitous, and mouth impassioned rhetoric. This made Nalini (played by Chapekar) seem fickle, shifting her affections effortlessly from Keropant to Vaikunth.[72]

The role specialisation of actors worked both ways. Some stri-parties could not switch to male roles, or were not accepted as such by spectators, as with Gandharva. But Vishnupant Pagnis and Keshavrao Date were quite effective in male roles in later years (and also in films). Rambhau Kundgolkar, a pupil of Abdul Karim Khan and a singing stri-party, joined Natyakala-prasarak Mandali as 'Sawai Gandharva' in 1908 and later became a distinguished music teacher.[73]

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[70] Lele, *Natak-mandalichya Birhadi*, pp. 26–28.

[71] Bodas, *Majhi Bhumika*, pp. 208–10.

[72] Chapekar, *Smriti-dhan*, p. 100.

[73] Sawai Gandharva's best-known pupil, Bhimsen Joshi, started a three-night music festival at Pune in 1953 to commemorate him. This highly prestigious 'Sawai Gandharva Mahotsav' has in recent years become a

There were some 'character actors' reminiscent of the Vishnudas era. A well-known painter of theatre scenes, named Gunjal, was a hefty man with a loud voice and popular in the role of Yam in Trilokekar's play *Savitri*. This play was in great demand on the holy day of *vata-pournima* (which commemorates Savitri of mythology), and so was Gunjal: one year he performed the role eight times within a span of 24 hours.[74]

## Patronage and Politics

The dual political authority of the colonial state and princely states embedded within British India had cultural repercussions through their divergent interests – the former privileged drama as literature and awarded Dakshina prizes, but also checked seditious tendencies; the latter nurtured stage performance as a prized part of indigenous culture. The most substantial patronage came from the larger Maratha states of Baroda, Indore, and Gwalior; closer home and on a smaller scale Kolhapur encouraged certain companies and individual actors. Personal involvement in drama and theatre companies was displayed by political leaders from Phule and Ranade to Tilak and Agarkar, and further to Kelkar and Savarkar.

Theatre lore regards as most noteworthy the patronage extended by Sayajirao Gaikwad of Baroda to 'Gandharva', which 'honoured both the donor and recipient'.[75] However, this was more a symbolic gesture than any financial benefit: the company had to travel to Baroda once a year upon receiving an invitation, perform one new and four old plays, and receive Rs 5,000. (In the absence of an invitation, no money was paid that year.) In practical terms, the company could have recouped the amount in three to five performances in Mumbai. But the patronage established the fledgling company's credentials, so it openly advertised this 'princely patronage'. The Gwalior Court had offered patronage to Lalitakala Company, but Bhosale politely declined and made a point of advertising that his company enjoyed 'public patronage'.[76]

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daytime festival that spans three or more days. Its 61st session was held in December 2013.

[74] Varerkar, *Maza Nataki Sansar*, p. 211 and scattered references.

[75] Desai, *Makhamalicha Padada*, p. 26.

[76] Kale, *Lalitakalechya Sahavasat*, p. 15.

Gandharva Company's experience at Gwalior differed: Madhavrao Shinde viewed plays day and night and was inspired to stage (and act in) a special performance by the state nobility. Initially Holkar's patronage to Yashwant Mandali in 1919 was extraordinarily generous, offering the actors an affluent lifestyle and requiring no discipline, but not productive of successful plays either at Indore or Mumbai. It ended with the departure of Bodas, the earlier proprietor, in 1921.

Princely patronage involved royal whims as well. One prince ordered a special show of *Svayamvar* to be held in the central part of his large durbar hall, partitioned with cloth curtains on both sides – because the other wings of the hall had other simultaneous entertainment, including solo music concerts by a courtesan and a male singer on one side, and a tamasha on the other.[77] The play finished at 2:30 a.m., but the prince ordered Act V of *Mrichchha-katik*, to be followed by Act II of *Samshaya-kallol*. At this point he fell asleep and the cast could leave. Another prince, after the complete performance of a play, made the actors sing his favourite songs from other plays. Still another ordered more amorous interaction between the hero and the heroine.[78] A princess wanted a dance sequence in *Mrichchha-katik* – which could be accommodated at a day's notice only because the playwright, Deval, was present and wrote an appropriate song and indicated a scene where it could be inserted. At one princely court, *Ram-rajya-viyog* was announced, but the prince ordered *Manapaman* instead at the last minute. Bhosale who had dressed as Manthara, had to quickly change into the male garb of Dhairyadhar.[79]

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The late 19th century established theatre as a vehicle for social and political ideologies, with networking between public leaders, playwrights, and theatre companies. On its visit to Calcutta 'Kirloskar' carried a letter of recommendation from Tilak addressed to Surendra Nath Bannerji, introducing it as 'my company'.[80]

The suspicion of propagating nationalism – especially of the militant variety – elicited direct and indirect state censorship. Every new

[77] *Ibid.*, p. 215.
[78] Bodas, *Majhi Bhumika*, p. 66.
[79] Kale, *Lalitakalechya Sahavasat*, p. 16.
[80] Desai, *Makhamalicha Padada*, p. 65.

play had to be approved in advance by the collector of the district where it was to be performed; sometimes the Oriental translator was required to make a meticulous English translation of the text for the purpose. This scrutiny caused frequent delays and ways of averting it were devised by camouflaging the text.[81]

Predictably, there was petty politics at the local level. Chapekar mentions his first meeting with the British district collector of Satara when he had given the customary free passes to the officers. But the collector's secretary and the police prosecutor demanded unlimited passes and when refused, decided to avenge themselves by strictly imposing the deadline of 1:30 a.m. as closing time. One evening they attended a performance of *Mrichchha-katik* with this aim – which was discovered at 12:30 a.m. when only four acts were over. Chapekar instructed the actors to race through the remaining three acts, omitting large chunks of material, to finish with 10 minutes to spare.[82]

Several plays, in addition to *Kichak-vadh*, were banned as seditious. Vir Joshi's *Rakshasi Mahattvakanksha* was temporarily suspended in Vidarbha because of his inflammatory public speeches. Occasional terrorism aggravated the situation. In 1909, Mr Jackson, the district collector, was assassinated by a young spectator in a Nashik theatre at the beginning of Kirloskar Company's play. The company's troupe was immediately placed under house arrest and forbidden to perform for about three months. As a result, Gadkari withdrew his new play which had political overtones.[83]

Theatre companies' contribution to political (and social) causes was substantial. Bhosale had contributed thousands of rupees secretly to the freedom struggle and to social causes, as Chapekar mentions. In 1899 'Kirloskar' had contributed the earnings of one performance (Rs 2,700) of Kolhatkar's *Vir-tanaya* to a fund for famine relief in Gujarat.[84]

If society at large was deeply involved in theatre, so were theatre companies attuned to the major social and political events around them.



[81] Varerkar, *Maza Nataki Sansar*, scattered references.
[82] Chapekar, *Smriti-dhan*, pp. 130–31.
[83] Varerkar, *Maza Nataki Sansar*, pp. 136–37, 204, 322–24.
[84] Bodas, *Majhi Bhumika*, p. 65.

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# Section IV
## Gender, Performance, and Discursive Interventions

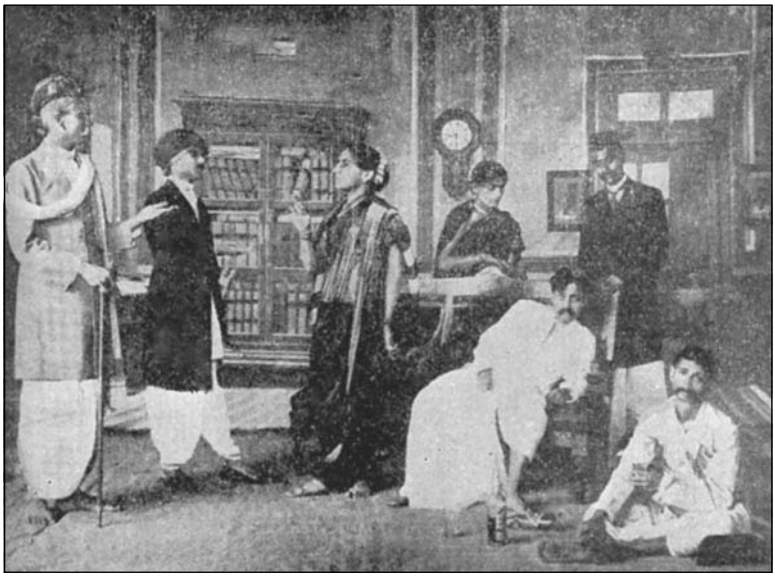

**Plate 10.1:** Scene from *Ekach Pyala* showing Sindhu (Bal Gandharva, centre) and Sudhakar (Ganpatrao Bodas, sitting on chair), with friends and relatives, c. 1919.

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# 10

# Enter Women

## Pioneering Women Dramatists and Actresses

**Plate 10.2:** Hirabai Pednekar, c. 1910.

**Plate 10.3:** Girijabai Kelkar, c. 1927.

### Women Dramatists

The vast popularity of Kirloskar's musicals, especially *Saubhadra*, inspired similar mythological plays even in remote corners of Maharashtra. The few women who were given an education at home or in schools eagerly tried their hand at drama in the 1880s, though in the privacy of their homes. That this happened with the encouragement of a man in the family – usually father or husband – was only natural. The earliest of these efforts were published – if at all – for private circulation, without expectation of being performed. What is impressive is the early age at which they wrote. Women's entry into the field of fiction was a parallel development: but stories and novels had a better chance of being published in magazines.

The enormous enterprise of staging a play was quite beyond the reach of the early women dramatists who thus remained obscure.

*Kashibai Phadke*

Research has discovered the first woman dramatist to be Kashibai Phadke née Sahasrabuddhe (1873–1896) who wrote *Sangit Sita-shuddhi* (The Purification of Sita) at the age of about 14 in 1887.[1] Her loving father, a wealthy Brahmin education inspector, had taught her Marathi and Sanskrit at home, and also got her married in childhood in accordance with the prevalent custom. She still lived in her parental home when she wrote the play, but almost immediately reached puberty and went to her marital home. During her nine-year-long married life she gave birth to five children of whom only one survived. She also started suffering from epileptic fits whose increased frequency debilitated her to the point of an early death after being bedridden for about three years. Her grieving father had her play – her sole literary creation in an otherwise stunted life – privately printed a year after her death for circulation within the extended family.

The play traces the well-known chain of events from the *Ramayan*: Sita's abduction by Ravan during her forest exile, Ram's grief and subsequent attack on Lanka, his defeat and killing of Ravan, Sita performing an ordeal by fire to prove her chastity which led to Ram's accepting her, and finally Ram's coronation at Ayodhya. The straightforward narrative in the form of a dialogue lacks dramatic attributes, and does not even focus on Sita's purification ordeal. The religious–literary and Sanskrit-influenced play is cast entirely in the Kirloskar mould and is replete with songs (including verse metres) some of which have been bodily lifted from *Saubhadra*.

*Sonabai Kerkar*

Another 14-year-old, Sonabai Kerkar (1880–1895), wrote her play shortly afterwards. Born to a prosperous courtesan of Goa, the short-lived girl was raised in Mumbai and educated in a missionary school. The bright student, fond of writing poetry, developed an incurable health problem during her school years. Her *Sangit Chhatrapati*

[1] Tara Bhavalkar, 'Aadya Marathi Stri-natakakar' in *Marathi Natya-parampara: Shodh ani Aswad*, Pune: Mehta Publishing House, 1995, pp. 80–85. Bhavalkar mentions having read the text at Mumbai Marathi Grantha-sangrahalaya; by March 2013 it had unfortunately been reported lost.

*Sambhaji Natak*, based on easily available historical chronicles, was published posthumously in 1896.[2] As is usual with women authors, the originality of the play has been questioned. One view claims it to be an imitation of another contemporary play with the same title, with erotic dialogue and gaudy lyrics probably inserted later by others.[3] The contrary view espoused by theatre historian Bhimrao Kulkarni stresses Sonabai's superior merit shown by her essay on gleanings from Sambhaji's life appended to the play. Incidentally, there were 20 plays about Sambhajiraje before 1947, and 21 since then up to 1970.[4]

The play's strength, according to Kulkarni, is its in-depth psychological interpretation of young Sambhaji's gradual estrangement from his father through a series of small episodes where he is more sinned against than sinning. His isolation and being constantly misunderstood culminates in his addiction to liquor induced by bad company; finally he loses his emotional balance. But his interaction with his mother is sensitively brought out in an emotional scene, and the final dramatic scene of his martyrdom at the hands of the Mughals highlights his innate nobility of character. A surprisingly mature creation by the young girl, the play has depth and suitable songs – set to Kirloskar's tunes – which mesh well. Sonabai's play was discovered relatively late by drama historians and never performed.

### *Hirabai Pednekar*

For long Hirabai Pednekar (1885–1951) was regarded as the first Marathi woman dramatist because of the visibility she enjoyed. Also a courtesan's daughter, she lost her mother early and was raised by a maternal aunt in Mumbai, educated at a missionary school, and trained in classical music. Her beauty, melodious voice, and interest in theatre attracted Kirloskar Company's handsome actor Joglekar with whom she entered into a serious relationship.[5] Encouraged by

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[2] Kulkarni, *Aitihasik Marathi Natake*, pp. 159–61. An intensive search has unfortunately failed to discover a copy of Sonabai's book.

[3] Jaya Dadkar et al. (eds), *Sankshipta Marathi Vangmaya Kosh: Arambhapasun 1920 paryantacha Kalkhanda*, Mumbai: G.R. Bhatkal Foundation, 2003 (1998), p. 118.

[4] Kulkarni, *Aitihasik Marathi Natake*, pp. 270–71.

[5] Madhavi Desai, *Gomanta Saudamini*, Parvari: Heramb Prakashan, 2001, pp. 7–11.

S.K. Kolhatkar, she published poems and articles in well-known magazines.

At 19 Hirabai wrote her first play, *Jayadrath-Vidamban* (The Humiliation of Jayadrath, 1904) based on a mythic episode during the forest exile of the Pandavs, with a plethora of (55) songs hung on a bare plot.[6] While the five brothers are away, Jayadrath enters the forest on a hunt and covets the beautiful Draupadi at first sight. The sage assigned to protect her is unwilling to use his powers because of Dharmaraj's pacific policy. Jayadrath ties him up and drags Draupadi away, but her paativratya prevents him from touching her. The Pandavs return, Jayadrath surrenders to Dharma and begs forgiveness; he is allowed to go unpunished. The play generally extols paativratya and one of Draupadi's touching lines is: 'Beauty is dangerous to the woman who possesses it' (Act III, Scene 2). Many of the songs have erotic touches, especially Jayadrath's descriptions of the female body and his expressions of lust for Draupadi. The play was generally well received.

Better known is Hirabai's *Sangit Damini* (performed in 1908, published in 1912).[7] The complicated imaginary plot opens with the protagonist Damini waking from her swoon on a seashore, looking for her husband Madhukar. Then she remembers the dreadful storm that had shipwrecked them. In the story thus far, Madhukar had left home to avoid being married against his will. He then acquired an education and wealth, and married Damini. After many years he returned home to find his father dead and both his sisters married. He was on his way to take Damini to her parents' house in Kantipur, but the shipwreck separated the two. Now both reach Kantipur separately, Damini in male disguise. She later exposes a villainous intrigue against the king. Touches of Shakespeare and Kolhatkar are obvious. The play has 72 songs which Hirabai herself set to classical tunes.

Hirabai's famed musical knowledge had drawn to her playwrights like Deval, Kolhatkar, Gadkari, and Khadilkar for tunes for their own lyrics. Deval had a special – almost familial – relationship with her.[8]

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[6] Hirabai Pednekar, *Sangit Jayadrath-vidamban Natak*, Mumbai: Induprakash Chhapkhana, 1904.

[7] Hirabai Pednekar, *Sangit Damini*, Mumbai: Hirabai Pednekar, 1912.

[8] Hirabai was the illegitimate daughter of Deval's older and short-lived brother, and he treated her like an adopted daughter; Tembe, *Maza Sangit-vyasang*, pp. 145–46.

The staging of *Damini* was not smooth: it was refused by 'Kirloskar' as 'a prostitute's play', and then staged by Bhosale with much fanfare (Plate 8.3), though it failed to make a mark. After Joglekar's sudden death in 1911, Hirabai is said to have taken to drink. She formed a friendship with S.K. Kolhtkar for a while, but later withdrew from worldly life. (A play based on her life, Vasant Kanetkar's *Kasturi-mriga*, was written and staged years after her death.)[9]

*Girijabai Kelkar*

With Girijabai Kelkar (1886–1980), a consistently articulated and upper-caste female voice entered the sphere of drama, although she was obscured after some successful years because of her lack of literary craftsmanship. It is worth noting that the Marathi Sahitya Parishad's history of Marathi literature (regarded as standard) does not mention her – or Sonabai or Hirabai – as a playwright, but refers to her only in passing as a short story writer. And this, despite her having presided over the annual Marathi Natya Sammelan in 1927 – a rare honour for a woman.

Girijabai Kelkar, née Draupadi Barve, spent her childhood in various parts of Gujarat and studied in a Gujarati school.[10] At 15 she was married to M.C. Kelkar (younger brother of N.C. Kelkar), a 27-year-old Mamlatdar (officer in charge of government lands) who had already lost two wives. Her husband's transferable job took her all over western and northern Maharashtra. After mastering literary Marathi, she started contributing short stories and articles to magazines in her free time. Although snugly ensconced within a patriarchal family structure, she had reacted at an early age to women's absence among authors and decided to write a book when she grew up.[11] Her first collection of published articles, *Grihini-bhushan* (c. 1910), prompted a popular belief that it was authored by her husband or brother-in-law, given the rarity of women writers. Her first play (1913) scandalised Jalgaon in north Maharashtra where the family was then based, and a kirtankar eulogised women of mythology by snidely

[9] Dadkar et al., *Sankshipta Marathi Vangmaya Kosh* (up to 1920), pp. 349–50.

[10] Girijabai Kelkar, *Draupadichi Thali*, Pune: M.M. Kelkar, 1959. This is an autobiography.

[11] *Ibid.*, pp. 42–43.

commenting that they did not write plays and – by an unexplained leap of imagination – encourage their children to become actors.

Although primarily a mother and housewife, Girijabai authored books of advice to women, novels, and several plays including *Ayesha* and *Hich Mulichi Aai* (This is the Bride's Mother), in addition to those discussed below. She helped Ramabai Ranade in her efforts on behalf of women, founded a ladies' club at Jalgaon about 1910, with its own building and library (believed to be the first women's library in Maharashtra,), and spent time in social work.

But Girijabai's autobiography reveals her mindset to be dominated by her husband – albeit to a lesser extent than Ramabai Ranade's personal narrative which is essentially a hagiography of her husband, Justice Ranade. Like Ramabai, she too refers to her husband as 'Himself'.[12] M.N. Anay in his foreword praises her deification of her husband.

Initially Girijabai's entry into the field of drama made no discursive waves – or even ripples – because of her location within a conventional and literary Brahmin family. Her original contribution was the creation of a series of strong female characters – representing high principles, qualities like valour and nationalism, and dedicated service to society. As a housewife who eked out time for her literary pursuits, she could not match male dramatists' well-crafted and powerful women characters. But her women are far more natural and empathetic – as women rather than female heroes.

Like other women writers before her, Girijabai was tempted to deploy social plays to convey a progressive message through entertainment. In her first play, *Purushanche Banda* (Men's Rebellion, 1913), she has attempted 'to point out the duties and errors of men in very mild words, without maligning them' and to persuade her 'brethren' to educate and honour women.[13] In his foreword, S.K. Kolhatkar (also a family friend) gestures to Khadilkar's *Bayakanche Banda* (Women's Rebellion, 1907), commenting that it merited an equally powerful and well-crafted rejoinder, rather than this maiden venture of an inexperienced writer. However, he sees as the play's strength women's victory won through their 'compassion and observance

[12] For women's Marathi autobiographies, see Kosambi, *Crossing Thresholds*, pp. 34–39.

[13] Girijabai Kelkar, 'Upodghaat' in *Purushanche Banda*, Jalgaon: G. Kelkar, 1913, pp. 1–3.

of duty, qualities which grace the female sex, rather than through beauty and valour as in *Bayakanche Banda*'.[14] Kolhatkar orchestrated the hastily written play's performance at Jalgaon. Other well-placed family friends felicitated her with a gold medal as 'the first woman dramatist'.

Set in an imaginary, contemporary princely state, the play opens with the king being advised by his newly installed guru, Swami Vikaranand, to avoid all contact with women for spiritual reasons: 'Woman is a gateway to hell, a cup of poison . . . a venomous female cobra [obstructing] the path to God' (Act I, Scene 1). Easily swayed, the king orders all men in his kingdom to abandon their wives, on pain of losing their jobs. Most men agree, with some making clandestine arrangements to meet their wives; a few make a spirited stand against the order.

Meanwhile young Kumudini, a sardar's daughter, propagates progressive ideas through a book, emphasising men's duty to educate women instead of blaming their ignorance. Kumudini's medical education has been interrupted by her father's illness, but she plans to open a women's hospital with the help of a US-returned woman doctor. The queen – now estranged from the king – supports the hospital, and a female religious guru (Saraswatidevi) provides advice and encouragement. Opposed to the swami's ideology and the 'men's rebellion' he has instigated, the lady decides to defeat it – not by deceit as practised by Arjun of mythology (and Khadilkar's play), but through a rational disputation.

A crisis erupts when the prince, temporarily in charge of the kingdom, meets with an accident. He is admitted to Kumudini's hospital for women, in contravention of the rules, at the queen's tearful entreaty. Won over by Kumudini's skilful and tender nursing, he falls in love with her and proposes marriage. She needs time to think: despite her modern (semi-feminist) belief in women's rights and freedom, she is conventional enough to need her father's consent. Besides, the king has forbidden all marriages. In the final scene, the king comes to visit the prince, succumbs to strong family bonds, and is reunited with his family. All the elders happily give their consent to the prince's marriage to Kumudini. Saraswatidevi defeats the swami

[14] Shripad Krishna Kolhatkar, 'Prastavana' in Girijabai Kelkar, *Purushanche Banda*, p. 9.

in a debate and proves to him the salience of the complementarity of the sexes. All ends well.

Girijabai's third play, *Rajkunwar athava Shirkanacha Sud* (A Massacre Avenged, 1924), reconstructs the brief, anarchic and haunting historical aftermath of Sambhajiraje's capture by the Mughals – a theme already handled by many.[15] The background is the close connection by marriage between Shivajiraje and the Shirke family, Sambhajiraje's subsequent massacre of the Shirkes, and Ganoji's revenge. Girijabai bases her play upon a historical novel, adding Rajkunwar as Shivaji's daughter and Ganoji Shirke's wife, and portraying Yesubai as Ganoji sister.

The play showcases women's extraordinary qualities through the protagonist Rajkunwar – courageous, proud of her lineage and mindful of her duty towards it, and ready to lay down her life to defend the Maratha kingdom now confronted with a dire and uncertain future. Yesubai, wife of Sambhajiraje ('the Maratha king gone astray') is a noble and ideal pativrata, possessed of statesmanship and leadership qualities. Two minor female characters add their mite to the patriotic venture.

The action is located mostly at the hill fort of Raigad, the seat of Shivajiraje at whose funerary monument some Marathas are seen discussing the feasibility of rescuing Sambhajiraje from Mughal captivity. Sambhajiraje's little son Shahu endearingly offers to go alone on this rescue mission, if no one else is willing. Rajkunwar persuades Yesubai to unite and lead the confused Marathas. She also tries to persuade her resentful husband about the importance of this project and about women's participation in it: a true pativrata does not merely obey her husband; she also corrects him when he follows a wrong course. This applies more to royal women: 'Everyone has two families – the one at home and the nation at large. When the nation is at risk, one has to give up one's domestic life to protect the nation' (Act I, Scene 5).

At the beginning of Act II, Rajkunwar makes an impassioned and rousing speech in full court headed by Yesubai:

> Has the Maratha allegiance to their king already vanished? . . . Have men lost their love for swaraj? . . . This is the Maharashtra [Shivajiraje] liberated

[15] Girijabai Kelkar, *Rajkunwar athava Shirkanacha Sud*, Jalgaon: G. Kelkar, 1924.

> from the grip of the Mughals, winning credit as 'the protector of cows and Brahmins' by preserving religion; the kingdom which he founded and the religion which he protected by risking his life in battle . . . On his subjects he lavished more affection than on his own children: do these same subjects now hesitate to rescue the son of that Great Soul, their own king? . . . Has the lustre of the Kshatriyas waned? . . . But we women have not lost the Kshatriya lustre. Maratha women will not sit chatting idly when the time has come to do battle. If you men find it hard to rescue your king, this Rajkunwar will equip every single dasi in the fort, lead them all into battle, and rescue the king (Act II, Scene 1).

Rajkunwar sends two loyal servants in disguise – a man in female clothing and a woman in male clothing (affording practically the only light touches to relieve the otherwise grim ambience) – to collect information both within and outside the fort. Parallel to these events, Ganoji plots to deliver Yesubai and Shahu to the Mughals with the help of the fort-keeper – whose wife tries unsuccessfully to avert it and is therefore locked up in a dungeon. When Rajkunwar finally succeeds in persuading her husband to abandon his treachery, it is already too late. Sambhajiraje has stoically faced a cruel death, after abdicating in favour of his stepbrother Rajaram. Yesubai requests her officers to kill her and her son rather than let them be captured by the enemy, but the attempt is foiled by a Mughal officer who then leads them away. The play attempts a somewhat positive concluding note, with Ganoji promising Rajkunwar help to stabilise Maratha affairs.

It is tempting to read the play as a political allegory, stressing the need for a common resistance to colonial power. But this does not seem to be the implicit message; the sole objective being to centre-stage women's political allegiance and ability to mobilise themselves for political resistance.

Neither Hirabai nor Girijabai was overtly feminist, but their female protagonists enabled a subject position for the female spectator, overcoming the alienation caused by the standard male protagonist.[16] Importantly, these female protagonists functioned as active agents of social or political change and thus differed from the popular, male-authored heroines who basically remained coyly attractive objects of male desire.

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[16] For a discussion of this point, see Elaine Aston, *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre*, p. 44.

## The Discourse about Women on Stage

The idea of decent women appearing on stage was shocking in Vishnudas's time although he thought it necessary to state that ancient Sanskrit plays showed women in young female roles, with men acting as mature women.[17] During his lifetime, Punekar Hindu Stri Natak Mandali employed 'respectable' women from the entertainer community, but as an exception.

Such exclusion was rooted basically in the moral anxiety that the sight of flesh-and-blood women on stage would titillate and distract male actors, rendering them unable – or unwilling – to restrain themselves. Thus women would be culpable for the undesirable outcome (rather than men for lacking self-control) and ultimately for subverting the theatre company's morality.

A forceful proponent of the argument was the theatre historian A.V. Kulkarni.[18] To him the idea of having women on stage was an unhealthy imitation of the West where male–female interaction was a common social feature; Indian women's 'shyness, modesty, and ability to maintain their distance' constituted a vital part of their charm. Women's proximity and physical touch therefore aroused men and disturbed them emotionally; this could not be allowed by a theatre company. As a clinching proof, Kulkarni recounts the anecdote of an actor dressed up as Krishna and an actress as Radha, ready for an erotic scene. But the two were aroused in anticipation and engaged in 'improper conduct' right in the wings. The curtain could not be raised and the angry audience protested at the delay until the duo was brought to their senses. Instances of men losing their heads in the proximity of women on stage have also been recorded. In the all-women Manohar Stri Sangit Mandali, the male manager who played bit roles acted as a servant in a scene which required him to carry away the princess (played by Suranga Parvatkar), and made amorous overtures to her. Without making allowances for the occasion, she beat him up with her shoe in full view of the audience.[19]

A.V. Kulkarni's second argument has an international resonance: stri-party men displayed greater acting talent than actresses who only played themselves. 'The beauty that often abounds in artificial things is

[17] Bhave, 'Prastavana' in *Natya-kavita-sangraha*, p. 3.
[18] Kulkarni, *Marathi Rangabhumi*, pp. 209–11.
[19] Desai, *Gomanta Saudamini*, pp. 85–86.

missing in natural things, and results in disappointment'.[20] He echoes the idea of the essentialised and exaggerated women portrayed by stri-parties being more attractive – especially to the male gaze – than real women (as discussed in the next chapter).

Interestingly a progressive–conservative consensus in the reform discourse across the ideological divide supported Kulkarni's insistence on women's exclusion from theatre and the public sphere in general. The only divergent voice was raised by G.G. Agarkar whose consistently progressive reform agenda advocated a mixing of the sexes from childhood through schooling to prevent an unhealthy attitude. Such natural association, he argued, made it possible and natural for girls and boys to interact without undue shyness or gender awareness.[21] After his death in 1895, his Anglo-Marathi paper *Sudharak* followed this liberal legacy, and aired it in a Marathi review of A.V. Kulkarni's book. Its arguments are succinct: male actors are unable to perform – even with a great deal of effort – the roles that women could perform with ease and success; the dress of even the well-known stri-parties of the day cannot conceal their original sex; young boys in female dress may not be easily recognisable but are untrained in the difficult art of acting. 'As a result, even 40-year-old men are compelled to part with their moustache or paint it over and don the female costume'. But their face and physique are already unsuited to the female garb, which leads to disenchantment at the unconvincing spectacle.

> We do not believe that there is any beauty or wonder – in a dramatic sense – in men acting as women, or women as men. The main objective of a play is not to project an authentic female appearance, but to convey the right emotions and passions at various junctures in the plot. Naturally, an actor dressed as a woman finds this doubly difficult, compelled as he is to also behave like a woman. Instead, if women were to act in female roles, they would only need to focus on acting in a manner appropriate to the occasion. If the play does not contain scenes that are objectionable for a mixed cast to perform, neither the actors nor the spectators would be embarrassed. A play is defined broadly as a depiction of real life.

[20] Kulkarni, *Marathi Rangabhumi*, p. 211.

[21] G.G. Agarkar, *Agarkar-vangmaya*, Khanda 1, M.G. Natu and D.Y. Deshpande (eds), Mumbai: Maharashtra Rajya Sahitya ani Sanskriti Mandal, 1984, pp. 201–08, especially p. 108. Agarkar was arguing for women's entry into the public sphere in general and not about their appearance on stage.

> As the acts in real life involve both men and women, it is not logical that their reflection on stage should be 'woman-less' . . . Purely from the theatrical perspective, we feel that the absence of women to perform female roles is a great lacuna in theatre companies.[22]

Elsewhere a variation of the first, moralistic, argument above was couched in the form of concern for women: respectable women should not be exposed to the male gaze as entertainers; that was the province of courtesans and women of dubious morals. Star stri-parties were vocal about this. Gandharva said, as president of the Marathi Natya Sammelan in 1933, that respectable women went astray when they entered the world of entertainment, and (mistakenly) cited the example of Durga Khote's (alleged) insistence on working only with Govindrao Tembe (in films). Solicitor Laud sent him a legal notice for defaming his daughter. Gandharva was unrepentant about having hurt his friend and benefactor and refused to apologise. Finally Tembe intervened and averted a lawsuit and Laud showed his innate generosity yet again by not pressing the matter.[23]

The second and artistic argument was that there was no skill in actresses playing female roles; their skill would lie in playing male roles convincingly. Unsurprisingly none of these critics extended the argument to male actors performing male roles; they were never found wanting in acting skills on grounds of gender. In the age of uncontested gendered double standards, the argument remained unselfconsciously one-sided.

But contrary to popular belief and despite such opposition, women were not altogether absent from theatre. Kulkarni himself concedes the skill displayed by 'women who occasionally acted as men', and mentions one Vithabai in the Punekar Mandali whose role of Abhimanyu was 'admired by many' – though not the author himself, one infers.[24] Banahatti mentions actresses (belonging to the entertainer community) with impeccable moral credentials who worked in 'mixed' theatre companies.[25]

The odds were heavily stacked against women entering theatre: respectable women, constrained even within the domestic sphere,

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[22] Cited in Kulkarni, *Marathi Rangabhumi*, pp. 3–4.
[23] Desai, *Makhamalicha Padada*, pp. 197–200.
[24] Kulkarni, *Marathi Rangabhumi*, p. 212.
[25] Banahatti, *Marathi Rangabhumicha Itihas*, p. 227.

had no freedom to be themselves even in the privacy of the home, let alone find self-expression on stage. Besides, the popularity of musical plays rendered indispensable a good knowledge of classical music, and that was not included as a woman's usual accomplishments. An average woman could sing devotional songs and women's songs – but only at women's informal gatherings. Classical music remained the preserve of courtesans.

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Thus the women trained in classical music belonged to the hereditary courtesan community and were automatically excluded from the class of respectable women, irrespective of their actual conduct. That some of these women did indeed make successful forays into the musical theatre is indicated by the number of 'mixed' or all-women theatre companies that existed at the time. This was especially the case in Goa where Marathi plays were regularly performed.[26]

One of the earliest and most successful of Goa's theatre families was originally attached to the Chandreshwar temple and formed Parvatkar Natak Mandali in the 1880s; it had women – and some men – of the family performing songs and dances. The company set up Shrikrishna Natya Club whose performances featured women in both female and male roles: Champabai Parvatkar's acclaimed roles as Arjun (*Saubhadra*) and Ashwinshet (*Samshaya-kallol*) won a gold medal on a tour of Maharashtra. Surangabai Parvatkar excelled as Narad (*Mahananda*) as well as Rewati (*Samshaya-kallol*). One of their bothers, Master Sadanand, performed female roles and was a good dancer; he joined Gandharva Company for a few years and returned to Goa later. Surangabai and her siblings later joined Manohar Stri Sangit Mandali (which had mainly women players and was co-founded by Kamalabai Gokhale), and then left to form their own Jagdish Sangit Mandali.

Kalangutkar Sangit Natak Mandali, established in the 1880s, had women playing female roles. Govekar Stri Sangit Mandali, dating possibly from the same time, was staffed only by actresses, as the name suggests, and staged performances also outside Goa. Shri Ramnath Prasadik Sangit Mandali (c. 1920) had members of the Ramnathkar family (attached to the Ramnath temple) in the cast and also among the

[26] Sukhthankar, *Rupadi*, pp. 156–66.

accompanists. The roles of both Devayani and Kacha in *Vidyaharan* were performed admirably by two Ramnathkar women. In 1920 Apsara Sangit Mandali was set up by Nageshkar brothers; they achieved wide fame in Maharashtra and were rewarded by Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur. Nirabai Nageshkar (a disciple of Alladia Khan) was one of the company's stars; she was highly successful as Subhadra (*Saubhadra*), and also in the male roles of Kacha and Shukracharya (*Vidyaharan*). In 1937 Sulochana Palkar set up Sulochana Sangit Mandali together with Panditrao Nagarkar (and performed *Bayakanche Banda* among other plays).

There is also mention of one Saraswati Phatarphekar, disciple of Vilayat Hussein Khan, excelling in the role of Dhairyadhar (*Manapaman*), although the dates of her career are not known.[27] The practice of women playing male roles seems to have prevailed only in the coastal areas. Varerkar mentions Belgaumkar Natak Mandali in which women played male characters – and appeared to him as hideous as female impersonators. The company closed down and gave rise to Manohar Sangit Mandali in which sometimes women played men and the other way around – apparently with equally disastrous results.[28]

## Famous Actresses

The risk involved in a respectable early-20th-century woman appearing on a stage or a public platform of any kind is unimaginable today, the assumption then being that as a public entertainer of men she deserved no respect. What was required from a respectable classical woman singer was a totally rigid posture, bowed head or lowered gaze, and lack of emotion; the least spontaneous gesture or movement from them to the rhythm of the music brought from the audience a shower of money (known as *daulat-jada*) reserved for a tamasha singer–dancer.[29] The life-stories of the early actresses are pervaded by a need for courage required to enact romantic roles on stage and also for male protection.

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[27] *Ibid.*, p.190.

[28] Varerkar, *Maza Nataki Sansar*, p. 126.

[29] An anecdote to this effect was narrated to me by the late Dr Ashok Ranade as shared by the famous singer Anjanibai Malpekar.

*Kamalabai Gokhale*

**Plate 10.4:** Kamalabai Gokhale, c. 1927.

Arguably the first important stage actress from a respectable family was Kamalabai Gokhale née Kamat (1900–1998), a competent rather than noteworthy performer.[30] She was born in Mumbai to poor parents who had migrated from Goa: her father was a renowned kirtankar and singer, and her mother Durgabai an accomplished sitar-player within the confines of the home. But Kamat's harassment led Durgabai to leave home with her little daughter.

Durgabai then eked out a living by acting in prose plays of Chittakarshak Natak Mandali, including Shakespeare and N.C. Kelkar's plays. Kamala's first stage appearance at the age of five was as a boy in a play within a play in *Vikar-Vilasit* (Agarkar's *Hamlet*), along with her mother. Kamala attempted the matriculation examination in 1915, but failed. She was trained in singing and dancing, married the proprietor's younger brother Raghunathrao Gokhale and the two turned it into a musical company. (Raghunath had been with 'Kirloskar' until his voice broke. But he practised singing rigorously.) From the age of five to 40, theatre was Kamalabai's life. Her last performances came during the grand theatre centenary celebration in Mumbai in 1944.

This was the time of fierce opposition to actresses on stage, especially from female impersonators. Kamalabai recounts that Gandharva wanted Raghunathrao back in his company for male leads opposite

[30] Bahadur and Vanarase, 'The Personal and Professional Problems of a Woman Performer', pp. 22–25; R.M. Kumtakar, 'Kamlabai Kamat: First Woman Artiste of Cinema', *Screen*, 27 January 1995; Desai, *Gomanta Saudamini*, pp. 80–82; G.R. Joshi, *Darshana Gunavantanche*, Pune: Shrividya Prakashan, 2003, pp. 42–45; Reena Mohan, *Kamlabai*, DVD produced and directed by Reena Mohan, 1992.

himself, but would not accede to his condition that Kamalabai be also allowed to join. Within the touring Chittakarshak Company, the couple lived a happy life, but inadvertently inflamed desire among the single men around them. This was expressed through mild forms of sexual harassment, her being crowded in doorways and in the wings of the stage.

Tragedy struck in 1928 when Raghunathrao had a stroke just as he was to go on stage; bravely Kamalabai donned his male garb and performed the role. He died soon. (Kamalabai already had two sons and was expecting her third child.) The company incurred a loss and closed down. Kamalabai helped to start 'Manohar Stri Sangit Mandali', with an all-women cast. Her memorable roles were Dhairyadhar in *Manapaman*, Ashwinshet in *Samshaya-kallol*, and both Subhadra and Arjun in *Saubhadra*.

Kamalabai's long stage career spanning 35 years included intermittent film appearances (described in Chapter 14). For a woman, she says, stage acting was safer because a distance could be maintained from male actors, whereas films (uncensored at the time) showed tight embraces. As the family's bread-winner, she raised her three sons and looked after her mother and brother-in-law. Her sons did her proud – especially Chandrakant who became famous as a stage and film actor. His son Vikram Gokhale still enjoys a successful career as a stage, film, and television actor.

*Hirabai Badodekar*

Women's right to play female roles was promoted as a matter of ideological commitment by Hirabai (1905–1989). The simultaneous valence and ambivalence of her location within the cultural sphere was complex in view of her parentage and the family's rupture with her illustrious father, singer Abdul Karim Khan.

**Plate 10.5:** Hirabai Badodekar, c. 1930.

The almost hagiographical biography of Abdul Karim (1872–1937) by his foremost disciple traces the many worlds

he straddled as a scion of the Kirana School of music in North India, who settled in Maharashtra and earned fame throughout India.[31] Still a household name in Maharashtra, he was one of the pre-eminent singers of the region in the early 20th century, along with Vishnu Digambar Paluskar, Bhaskar-buva Bakhale, and Ramkrishna-buva Vaze.[32] He introduced the Kirana style to Maharashtra, enriched his own classical repertoire with Marathi devotional songs and select stage music, opened the 'Arya Sangit Vidyalaya' in Belgaum (1910), Pune (1912), and Mumbai (1918), and also cut records. On one level he made music accessible to the common man by initiating the practice of holding ticketed public concerts in theatres and large halls (in a move that paralleled Vishnudas's shift to public patronage), on another he collaborated through practical demonstrations with Rao Bahadur Deval (brother of dramatist Deval) and C. Clement in their research on the Indian musical scale and the 22 *shruti*s. Across India he also sang for various princes and chiefs of states, viceroys and governors, eminent social and political leaders, and professional singers and musicians. He knew renowned figures in the world of theatre and literature. This pan-Indian adulation must have deeply impacted young Hirabai.

As a court singer at Baroda from the 1890s, young Abdul Karim was also required to teach members of the Zenana – and by extension Hirabai Mane, the beautiful mistress of Gaikwad's maternal uncle, Sardar Mane, and their young daughter Tara. The talented 15-year-old girl quickly learned both singing and playing the tabla, and helped her guru to write down the notation for different ragas, which was the new trend at the Baroda court. She started accompanying him on the tanpura at his concerts, and even gave a solo concert at the court. On Hirabai's sudden death in 1898, the grief-stricken Sardar Mane took to heavy drinking, ranted at Tara, and even shot at her one night. The terrified and injured girl begged her guru to rescue her, and the two fled to Mumbai.

There Abdul Karim (now 'Badodekar') married Tarabai (now Taherabibi) who bore him seven children of whom five survived infancy: Abdul Rehman alias Suresh Mane (1902), Champakali alias Hira Badodekar (born in 1905 at Miraj), Gulab or Gulkali alias

[31] Balkrishna Kapileshwari, *Sangit-ratna Abdul Karim Khan Yanche Jivan Charitra*, Pune: Balkrishna Kapileshwari, 1972.

[32] N.S. Phadke cited in Kapileshwari, *Sangit-ratna*, pp. 901–02.

Kamala Badodekar (1907), Abdul Hamid alias Krishna Mane (1910), and Sakina alias Saraswati Badodekar (1914). Abdul Karim opened music schools for boys which Tarabai managed, teaching both singing and Kathak dance. Their own children performed from a very young age at Abdul Karim's public concerts. But in about 1914 when the family lived in Pune, he suddenly stopped his daughters' musical training, indeed stopped them – unsuccessfully – even from listening to music, put them in a good Marathi school, made them dress like Muslim girls, and started Islamic education for his sons. A series of conflicts led Tarabai, after 22 years of a stressful married life, to leave home with the children in 1918. After maligning her for four years, Abdul Karim married another pupil. He died during a musical tour of South India.

Hirabai's early musical training was sporadic, both her parents being acutely aware of the undesirability of respectable girls singing.[33] Tarabai wanted this daughter to study medicine and enjoy practically the only acceptable and lucrative career open to women.[34] But she allowed Hirabai's musical training at home under Sureshbabu, and later briefly under other gurus as well.

In 1921 Hirabai held her first public solo concert at 16, at a music conference organised by V.D. Paluskar, Abdul Karim's rival. The same year Tarabai opened a music school, 'Nutan Sangit Vidyalaya', to earn a living for the family, with herself and the children as teachers. In 1923 Hirabai cut her first record, for 'His Master's Voice'; many more followed (totalling about 175), with this company as well as Odeon and Columbia. In 1924 she made history by holding a public, ticketed concert, at Aryabhushan Theatre in Pune. Such concerts had been a male monopoly and inaugurated by her now estranged father – who would certainly have condemned women breaching it to lay claim to an alternative forum to private concerts for whatever honorarium the patron offered. Hirabai frequently sang for the All India Radio's Mumbai station since its inception in 1928 (as Bombay

[33] Rajaram Humane, *Dhanya Janma Jahala: Shrimati Hirabai Badodekar Yanche Jivangane*, Pune: Shrividya Prakashan, 1980; Shailaja Pandit and Arun Halbe, *Gana-hira*, Mumbai: Maharashtra Rajya Sahitya Sanskriti Mandal, 1985.

[34] In an interesting parallel, Kesarbai Kerkar refused to let her daughter learn singing and did in fact succeed in making her a medical doctor.

Broadcasting Company). In 1937 she sang at the All India Music Conference held at Calcutta, at the recommendation of Kesarbai Kerkar. In 1941 she allegedly became the first woman to sing at the annual music concert at Jalandhar which had earlier observed the seclusion of women.

Meanwhile Hirabai had gravitated to the theatre in the late 1920s when its golden age was sliding into twilight. The family's financial straits made the move inevitable. It was aided by their close acquaintance with Gandharva Company's singer–actors (who stayed in the same building as them during their Mumbai season) and the spell cast by Gandharva himself over Hirabai and Sureshbabu. Tarabai moved to Pune and opened a theatre branch of her Nutan Sangit Vidyalaya, by staging *Samshaya-kallol* at Kirloskar Theatre in 1929, with Sureshbabu (Ashwinshet), Kamalabai (Rewati), and Saraswatibai (Krittika). Hirabai only sang in the long jalsa scene. The play toured Pune, Miraj, Sangli, and Solapur. Later that year *Saubhadra* was staged at Bombay Theatre, with Hirabai as Subhadra, along with Sureshbabu (Arjun), Kundgolkar (Krishna), and Kamalabai (Rukmini). It brought success in terms of both popularity and earnings. Hirabai was regarded as the sixth famous Subhadra, in the line of Bhaurao and Gandharva.

Immersing herself in the theatre world, Hirabai performed both old classics and new plays. Social and musical acceptability undoubtedly smoothed her way into the theatre, but equally – if not more – important was the protective presence of her siblings as fellow actors in the family's theatre company.

But their plays were appreciated only for the music; the acting was not considered up to the mark. Their success soon waned; debt compelled the company to disband in 1933. Its properties were confiscated in lieu of part payment; Hirabai paid off the rest in a few years with money from her music concerts. Despite her decision never to appear on stage again, she made an exception for the Marathi Theatre Centenary of 1943–1944. In 1944 she appeared in *Saubhadra* organised by Mumbai Sahitya Sangha, with Gandharva as Arjun. Later she played the female lead in old classics for her brother Krishnarao's theatre troupe organised on a contract basis, and made six tours between 1947 and 1953. The last of her subsequent sporadic stage appearances was in 1965.

Meanwhile Hirabai's private life was eventful. In 1924 she entered into an informal marriage with a wealthy (and married) Gujarati Jain

businessman, Manikchand Gandhi. Now known as Mrs Hirabai Badodekar, she gave birth in 1926 to a daughter who died almost immediately and in 1928 to a son. Her entering theatre caused a temporary rift between the couple, resolved when she left the stage. In later years Gandhi lost his eyesight; Hirabai helped him monetarily, and even accompanied him and his wife on pilgrimage to Jain holy places. He died in 1979.

Hirabai's entry into theatre enraged Abdul Karim, who abhorred actor–singers. He reminded everyone of the time Kundgolkar had left him to join a theatre company as a stri-party and a livid Tarabai had sent him a sari and blouse-piece as an offensive marker of acute disapproval. Now he feared that she would make his children 'dance on the stage with painted faces' – and worse still, cast siblings as romantic pairs. He refused to meet them when they tried to do so once during their mother's absence.

After the closure of the theatre branch, Hirabai also acted in films – Rangnekar's *Suvarna-mandir*, Baburao Painter's *Pratibha* (directed for Kolhapur's princely Shalini Studio in 1937), and Ravindra Films' *Sant Janabai*. This move proved remunerative, but cinema did not bring Hirabai the success it brought her sister Kamalabai.

Hirabai continued her musical career until 1973. She went abroad on two occasions – on a musical tour of Africa and as a member of the Indian government's cultural delegation to China – and was awarded the Padma Vibhushan.

### *Girijabai and Kesharbai Kelekar*

Girijabai Kelekar (1903–1982) had the honour of appearing in the first 'modern' play. Born in a courtesan family of Bandivade in Goa, she took seriously her formal musical training from Ramkrishna-buva Vaze.[35] She stayed in Goa with her mother and grandmother when her father took her four younger sisters and only brother (who was to die young) to Mumbai. In 1925 she joined them in Mumbai and studied music with Vilayat Hussain Khan. She was invited to sing on the radio in the early 1930s and gained fame. When the new theatre company, Radio Stars, was formed, she successfully played the lead role in their first and only production, *Baby*. But she then decided to return to Goa and devote herself to music.

[35] Desai, *Gomanta Saudamini*, pp. 26–30.

Girijabai's younger sister Kesharbai Bandodkar was also trained in music since childhood in Goa and later Mumbai. Attempts were made in the late 1920s to induct women into theatre, and Lalitakala Company proposed to make up for Chapekar's absence by inviting Kesharbai. Surprisingly this was strongly opposed by the music director Vaze-buva (her first music teacher). Later in 1931 the same company persuaded Kesharbai's sisters Girija and Durga Kelekar to play in Varerkar's *Sonyacha Kalas* for a sumptuous remuneration of Rs 400 a month each, to claim credit for introducing women in female roles.[36] But the scheme fell through because Durga decided to marry – she then entered the stage as Jyotsna Bhole in 1933. Kesharbai acted later in plays, including those written by Rangnekar for Natya Niketan.

*Jyotsna Bhole*

The paradigm shift wrought by Natya Manwantar and Natya Niketan also systematically introduced actresses on stage to gradually end female impersonation. Their progressive family-oriented plays introduced the New Woman as an important component of their cautiously promoted agenda.

**Plate 10.6:** Jyotsna Bhole, c. 1935.

The raging controversy about respectable actresses, partly settled by Hirabai Badodekar earlier, was finally put to rest by Jyotsna Bhole (1914–2001), a talented and attractive actress with a stage presence and a musical voice tinged with sadness. She was born at Bandode in Goa as Durga Kelekar in a large family with several loving siblings.[37] At the age of five she picked up various ragas taught by Vaze-buva to her older sisters Girija and Keshar, and then acted in a musical play in the village. After the family moved to

[36] Varerkar, *Maza Nataki Sansar*, pp. 551–52.

[37] Jyotsna Bhole, *Svara-vandana*, Pune: Swati Prakashan, 1970; Jyotsna Bhole, *Tumachi Jyotsna Bhole*, Pune: Anubandha Prakashan, 1998.

Mumbai, she won a school competition in singing, but barely passed Standard IV. Her father withdrew her from school and arranged formal musical training for her. Soon she was invited as a regular freelance singer by All India Radio's Mumbai station where Keshavrao Bhole spotted her. He began to teach her bhavgits and married her in 1932 when she was barely 18.

'Natya Manwantar' was formed in 1932 and Durga (now Jyotsna Bhole) made her debut as Bimba in *Andhalyanchi Shala* (1933). Earlier she had starred in the film *Sant Sakhu* made by Rangnekar, a close friend of Bhole's. (This film was different from the Prabhat film on the same theme.) Bhole gave up his medical studies in the last year of college and devoted himself to music, mostly as a music director. Prabhat Films' invitation in 1933 resulted in his 10-year stint there, followed by private singing tuitions. The family moved to Pune.

'Natya Niketan' was formed in 1941 by Rangnekar and included some of the same group of friends with Jyotsnabai as the female lead in most of its plays. Her roles in *Ashirwad* (1941), and especially *Kulavadhu* (1942) became immensely popular. Jyotsnabai had to juggle an itinerant stage career with domestic responsibilities and children (three sons and daughter Vandana who later acted on stage), with the help of a co-operative husband. Her personal image was that of an independent woman who nonetheless operated within the conventional family structure as a good wife, mother, housewife, and hostess. She soon came to be iconised as the New Maharashtrian Woman, as revealed by her self-narrative.

Jyotsnabai was ushered into the theatre world under the protective escort of her husband and co-worker Keshavrao; and Natya Manwantar itself was run like a large extended family. Long before she refuted in words Gandharva's claim that the theatre world was not safe for respectable women, she had done so in deed. In fact, Gandharva publicly lauded her as the inheritor of his mantle.

Political developments intersected with Jyotsnabai's theatre life in many ways. *Kulavadhu* was scheduled to open in Mumbai on 9 August 1942, but the arrest that morning of all the political leaders involved in the 'Quit India' movement postponed the event a couple of times, until 23 August. The play was later watched by Morarji Desai, and Jyotsnabai had the opportunity to sing for Mahatma Gandhi, Pandit Nehru, and other political figures. She was also part of the Indian cultural delegation to China in 1953.

*Jayamala Shiledar*

Jayamala Shiledar née Pramila Jadhav (1926–2013) was born in Indore, a city known for its princely patronage to music.[38] Her father Narayanrao Jadhav was an actor who worked for several theatre companies and the family accompanied him on his tours. In childhood Pramila had little formal training but cultivated her inborn talent with hard work. (The opportunity for formal training came her way years later and she obtained the degree of 'sangit-alankar' in 1963 from the Gaandharva Maha-vidyalaya founded by V.D. Paluskar.) She appeared on stage at 16 in 1942 as Sharada, and at Mumbai's Annual Theatre Festival in 1945 she played Sharada in a star-studded caste with Gandharva (as her mother), Ganpatrao Bodas, Keshavrao Date, and others. She worked in various theatre companies, including Gandharva Company in 1945, mainly in secondary roles but also in the lead role whenever Gandharva was indisposed.

About 1948 Pramila Jadhav acted against singer–actor Jayaram Shiledar who was already famous for his lead role in Prabhat Film Company's *Ram Joshi* (1948). The two launched their own company 'Marathi Rangabhumi'. Her father had wanted her to marry Shiledar but was deterred by the knowledge that he already had a wife and three daughters. The two did marry in 1950 and Pramila Jadhav became Jayamala Shiledar. The first Mrs Shiledar died a few months later, but her daughters grew up with the couple's two – Lata and Kirti – who have carried on the family tradition.

Jayamalabai consciously cast herself in Bal Gandharva's mould, paying equal attention to acting and singing, and emulating his style in both. She – along with her daughter Kirti Shiledar – has been regarded as the true representative of the Bal Gandharva tradition and a worthy successor to Hirabai Badodekar in the sangit natak tradition.

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From Bal Gandharva to Jyotsna Bhole was a significant progression in the theatre world: a progression from an exaggerated femininity to natural feminine grace in keeping with mainstream society's mores; from woman as a coy and alluring love-object to woman as a wife

[38] Jeevan Kirloskar (ed.), *Sangit Alankar Sau. Jayamala Shiledar*, Pune: J. Kirloskar, 1968. This biographical information has been culled from several short articles in the book.

and mother – and also, in some ways, from woman as an object to woman as a subject. In terms of musicality this was accompanied by the move from elaborately developed musical recitals as the mainstay of a play to pruned and disciplined songs as one of its many important elements. And yet, the line from Gandharva to Jayamala Shiledar shows uninterrupted continuity. Both streams were to continue in later times – the Kirloskar-style musicals as the repeatedly revisited old classics and the 'social realism' style as the new norm.

# 11

# Bal Gandharva

## From Female Impersonator to Icon of New Womanhood

An opportunity to see the charismatic Bal Gandharva perform on stage has always elicited extreme envy. Unfortunately it came my way when he was very old and I very young. My mother had taken along my older sister and me to see one of his last performances – in the eponymous role in *Sant Kanhopatra* about 1950. While my mother saw in her mind's eye an enchanting actor still in his prime, we sisters saw only an ageing man in an ill-fitting wig, pretending to be a woman. Our generation did not know the phenomenon or terminology of cross-dressing, but our blunt comments were certainly hurtful to our mother. It is only now, more than half a century later, that I begin to realise – and wish to unravel – the spell Gandharva had cast over at least two, and perhaps three, generations of men and women – even educated and refined women like my mother and her mother (who was Gandharva's exact contemporary).

**Plate 11.1:** Bal Gandharva, c. 1920.

The question then arises: does gender, like beauty, lie in the eye of the beholder? Or do certain

sections of male audiences like to see men dressed as women on stage, in preference to real women, as has been claimed? How is Gandharva's unprecedented hegemony over female roles in the musical theatre to be explained? Over the ages, female impersonation has been common to most cultures because respectable women were barred from publicly entertaining men. The novelty here is not merely Gandharva's successful female impersonations, but his iconisation as the New Woman during his lifetime and his enduring legacy that still requires actresses essaying 'his' roles to imitate him closely in order not only to prove their musical credentials, but also to validate their femininity.[1]

From adulation to deification was a short step. On the occasion of the actor's birth centenary on 26 June 1988, the famous writer P.L. Deshpande talked of Maharashtra's three favourite cult figures who radiated a magical aura – Chhatrapati Shivaji, Lokamanya Tilak, and Bal Gandharva.[2] He also accentuated his personal devotion and allegiance to Gandharva whom he identified as his family's 'cultural patron deity'.[3] This spirit pervades all writings about Gandharva and is succinctly summed up by his biographer Dnyaneshwar Nadkarni who promises that he 'will never try to desecrate the idol that was Balgandharva, and a critical look will always be accompanied by reverence and affection'.[4] Predictably biographical fiction followed, and recently also a 'biopic'.[5]

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[1] According to stage actress Nirmala Gogate who played these roles during the late 1950s and early 1970s, Gandharva's influence was very pronounced in the acting and singing style of Jayamala Shiledar who had actually worked with Gandharva, and who passed on the style to her daughter Kirti Shiledar. Nirmalatai escaped any direct influence on her acting, but it crept in through the senior actors and singers who coached her. She also conceded that the audiences expected the Gandharva style to be followed. Personal communication during conversations in early 2014.

[2] P.L. Deshpande, 'Johar Mai-bap Johar' in *Maharashtra Times Balgandharva Janma-shatabdi Visheshank*, Mumbai: Bennet, Coleman and Co., 1988, pp. 15–32.

[3] P.L. Deshpande, 'Daya Chhaya Ghe' in *Ganagot*, Mumbai: Mauj Prakashan, 2004, p. 194.

[4] Nadkarni, 'Preface', *Balgandharva and the Marathi Theatre*, p. x.

[5] For example, Gangadhar Gadgil, *Gandharva-yuga*, Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 2005; and the Marathi film *Balgandharva*, directed by Ravindra Jadhav, produced by Nitin C. Desai under the banner of 'Iconic Chandrakant

This essay revisits Gandharva with a divergent approach: it explores his 'performing gender', perforce minimising a discussion of his musical prowess which was a dominant part of his mystique. In seeking to understand this object of male desire and female adulation, it first briefly sketches his life and career, then discusses the phenomenon of female impersonation, analyses his dual self and split gaze as a successful stri-party, and lastly discusses audience complicity in the sex–gender paradox.

My broader argument is that Gandharva's triumph was his on-stage creation of a pretty and seductive 'dream woman' and also of a utopian social milieu within which she could function – both being illusory and far removed from the social setting of the majority audience: the conventional, largely sex-segregated extended family which would never tolerate such a woman in its midst. The titillating glimpses he provided of such a woman and her ideal social setting appealed to both the male and female imaginary of his time. Within this framework of the iconography of desire, I try to analyse his erotic appeal for certain men, and also his split gaze which could identify the location of male desire and then address it in his female creations. He could epitomise the ideal woman on stage precisely because he knew what kind of woman he desired as a man.

## Bal Gandharva, the Person

Narayan Rajhans's hesitant debut in Kirloskar Company in 1905 did not anticipate the unprecedented heights he would scale. He was a simple youngster from a conventional, albeit musical, Brahmin family, forced by financial compulsions to utilise his musical talent (and good looks) for a stage career. After friction within 'Kirloskar', he and two co-actors left the company in 1913 to establish Gandharva Sangit Mandali.

Initially he retained his Brahmin lifestyle by regularly reading religious texts after his bath, but gave up the practice on realising that he was already ritually polluted by the bath water fetched by a low-caste servant at the company's lodgings. His personal character was unimpeachable for years. Early in life he was addicted to betel leaf and tea; he gave up the first after his father's death in 1918, and

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Productions Pvt. Ltd.', and released in May 2011. Subodh Bhave played Bal Gandharva, with playback from Anand Bhate.

the second after Tilak's death in 1920, and also stopped occasional drinks in 1924. However, in later years he started eating meat three times a week 'to keep up his strength'.[6] In private life he was the head of an extended family. After his father's death he installed his mother, wife, and children in Pune. His older brother was made to give up his vaccinator's job as too demeaning for the star–actor; with his wife and son this brother joined the family at Pune, as did his sister who was deserted by her husband. His younger brother Vyankatesh alias Bapurao left school to work as a typist in a large mercantile firm in Mumbai, and in 1913 joined Maharashtra Natak Mandali specialising in prose plays. In 1919 he left to obtain musical training and later joined Gandharva Company. All these family members were financially dependent in varying degrees on Gandharva.

A rupture with the family resulted from Gauharbai Karnataki's appearance in his life in 1937, and his decision to live with her. In 1951, after his mother's death, he married her at the age of 63. She was and still remains a controversial figure, usually accused of having exploited him financially and even forced him to sing in his old age to earn money. But she also took care of him when he lost the use of his legs after paralysis in 1953. She died in 1963; four years later Gandharva himself died (on 15 July1967) at 79, also in Pune.

The adoring public has always seen Gandharva as a phenomenally talented but essentially simple, gullible, generous, and even spiritual artist, though impractical about money matters. The same image has been reconstructed for the younger generation by the film *Balgandharva*. His co-actors, however, depict him rather differently in their autobiographies, as self-centred and insincere (as documented in Chapter 8).

Gandharva's hegemonic position was unchallenged on the Marathi musical stage during a career that lasted from 1905 to about 1950. He played the female lead in 27 plays, but in later years also the occasional subsidiary female role and seven male lead roles, totalling 36. Despite his uneasy relationship with competitors, his widespread appeal earned him admirers among fellow stri-parties, such as Jaishankar Sundari from Gujarati theatre who referred to him as his guru.[7]

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[6] The meat was cooked by the company's milkman Kasim who was retained as a permanent employee at an exorbitant salary.

[7] Jaishankar Sundari, 'Maze Ek Guru', *Maharashtra Times Balgandharva Janma-shatabdi Visheshank*, Mumbai, p. 133. This is a Marathi translation of

## The Allure of a Female Impersonator

It is difficult to map the iconography of desire that enveloped Gandharva. Male adoration of him abounds in theatre lore; surprisingly, women also succumbed to his feminine charms. One documented female voice – a contemporaneous and discerning one – belongs to the actress Durga Khote. At the age of five she thought of Gandharva in female dress as 'a beautiful picture'; the impression was to last many years:

> Even today I honestly feel that such natural beauty, such sweetness, is rarely found. Narayanrao's physique was shapely enough to suit female roles, and his movements were so graceful that even very good-looking women of the time attempted to imitate him. Narayanrao's demeanour had nothing theatrical or artificial about it. His movements were natural. In daily life, he appeared tall, of a medium build; and without a trace of effeminacy in his bearing.[8] His knot of long hair would be hidden under his black fur cap; he never moved about without a cap. His bearing had no trace of the physical movements, effeminate gestures, or other strange peculiarities that characterized stri-party actors ... Narayanrao had an attractive personality. The set of his face was endearing. A shapely figure, fair skin, eloquent eyes – all these were natural gifts conducive to his profession.[9]

This description of Gandharva's beauty is endorsed by others, including stage actress Nirmala Gogate, whose career spanned the years 1955–1973 and who had seen him in his declining years. She speaks of his exquisite and soft complexion – fair with a golden tinge – which was radiant, his large eloquent eyes, his expressive hands, his delicate movements despite a slightly plump but well-proportioned body, and a dignified appearance like that of a well-born woman. All of this, she claims, brought people a new awareness and appreciation of feminine beauty. Added to this was his excellent singing. This enabled him to reign over the Marathi stage for 50 years from 1905 to 1955 (while Dinanath and Bhosale died relatively young).[10]

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an extract from the original Gujarati autobiography. For an abridged English translation of the extract, see Kathryn Hansen, *Stages of Life: Indian Theatre Autobiographies*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2011, p. 237.

[8] Other observers have described him as short of stature.

[9] Khote, *Mi – Durge Khote*, pp. 43–44.

[10] Personal communication from Mrs Nirmala Gogate.

In the same vein Durga Khote continues:

> Stri-party actors have been a subject of innumerable controversies. The discussion has even reached the point of regarding female impersonation as humiliating to women. But it is completely true that Narayanrao's acting did not seem distorted or unnatural. The gestures, dress, and jewellery of the heroines he played seemed to be those of aristocratic women of a high lineage. The rich silk saris and stoles he bought for his roles as heroines were very expensive and fine-textured. He wore only the saris that would tightly mould and decorate the body.[11]

Embedded within the eulogy is the contradiction that is often elided: some women may have been tempted – and even allowed – to imitate Gandharva's graceful movements, but no respectable woman would have dared to drape her sari tightly enough to reveal the contours of her body.[12] The strict family control over women's dress and demeanour would have disallowed it. (Importantly, Durga Khote herself never imitated him.) This is a crucial point developed in this article – that a man dressed as a woman could take the liberties that women themselves were not allowed.

What also invites discussion is the display of the female figure as a focus of male fantasy. In her classic article, Laura Mulvey talks of film actresses whose appearance is 'coded for strong visual and erotic impact' to enhance their '*to-be-looked-at-ness*'.[13] A male spectator appreciating a female impersonator with this gaze and a female spectator appreciating him with non-erotic interest complicates the situation considerably.

One can apply to an analysis of Gandharva other terminology from film studies. Cinema in general, and especially Hindi cinema, is said to be founded on 'scopophilia' or the pleasure of looking, in preference to 'epistemophilia' or the desire to know or to find out.[14] In films women are therefore projected as objects appealing to the

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[11] Khote, *Mi – Durga Khote*, pp. 43–45.

[12] For example, see the loosely but gracefully draped sari of Leela Chitnis in Plate 4.2.

[13] Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, London: The Macmillan Press, 1989, p. 19.

[14] Asha Kasbekar, 'Hidden Pleasures: Negotiating the Myth of the Female Ideal in Popular Hindi Cinema' in Dwyer and Pinney (eds), *Pleasure and the Nation*, p. 286.

heterosexual male erotic gaze. Transferring the analytical apparatus to the present case, one can speculate that Bal Gandharva's charm lay in his dual – heterosexual as well as homoerotic – appeal to different segments of the male audience.

Gandharva's close contemporaries admit that there were other better-looking female impersonators.[15] The theatre critic Lele claims that both Shankarrao Mujumdar and Vishnupant Pagnis looked more attractive in female garb.[16] Thus it was obviously his fashion consciousness and coquetry that held an appeal. Another of his assets was graceful actions, especially hand movements admiringly described by Durga Khote:

> The beauty of his hands and gestures was indescribable – whether they were Bhamini's hands wielding a weapon, Rukmini's hands carrying a garland at her *svayamvar*, Sindhu's hands holding the wooden stick of the stone grinding mill, Draupadi's piteously pleading hands spread before Krishna for help, or even a courtesan's hands lovingly offering a *paan*. In all this acting, the distinctiveness of his hands was conspicuous. They were smooth from the upper arm to the wrist, lithe, delicate, rounded – but at the same time strong and resolute. Because of their glossy fair colour, they seemed to be made of ivory. And the opening and closing movement of his supple fingers, and their tweaking of the padar, seemed naturally lovely and effective.[17]

But if Gandharva in his prime was a potential role model, advancing age took its toll, negating much of his earlier charm and vitiating many of his admirable attributes. His figure acquired the typically masculine shape with broad shoulders and narrow hips, which was hardly disguised by profuse ornamentation (Plate 11.1). After the age of 40 (in 1928) he introduced noticeably exaggerated movements bordering on the vulgar to compensate for this, as Durgabai notes. Gone was the softness in his acting, now replaced by 'an excess of provocative gestures', 'little skips and jumps, neck movements, provocative smiles' – which combined to lower the level of his performance.[18] His successors unfortunately saw only this part of his acting

[15] Nadkarni, *Balgandharva and the Marathi Theatre*, p. 58.
[16] Lele, *Natak-mandalichya Birhadi*, pp. 83–84.
[17] Khote, *Mi – Durga Khote*, p. 44.
[18] *Ibid.*, p. 46.

which they imitated or even accentuated. This became the norm and a guarantee for applause from the audience.

This historical moment coincided with the main actors in Gandharva Company growing fat, flabby, and shapeless. 'When Narayanrao, Master Krishna, and [Sadashivrao] Ranade stood on the stage in the play *Amrit-siddhi*, they blocked the view entirely – the stage was filled up! And the gaudy Marwadi dress and ill-fitting wigs were a blot on Sant Meerabai. Narayanrao's roles had become pitiable'.[19] Once Durgabai's father Solicitor Laud (who had helped Gandharva for years, both financially and in other ways) took him to task about this: 'Narayanrao's response was heart-breaking: "Saheb, all this has to be done when the impersonator gets old." He was aware of his situation; his self-confidence was gone'. About this time, he played a male role and Durgabai asked him for his reaction to his performance. His answer was: 'What can I tell you ... the only saving grace was that I did not try to adjust my padar! Everything else [that shouldn't have happened] did happen!'[20]

But Gandharva's music, says Durgabai, enchanted Maharashtra for decades even after his death, through his gramophone records.[21]

> His voice was a God-given gift. Alladia Khan Saheb had said once: 'A note is only that which emerges from his throat.' ... Narayanrao never betrayed his music. He put his heart and soul into his songs. Till the end he continued to sing the songs in exactly the same tunes to which they had been [originally] set ... With age came shortcomings, such as fatigue and breathlessness; but the sweetness never faded.[22]

This fidelity to the original tunes was regarded by some as unimaginative, especially in contrast to Dinanath Mangeshkar's musical innovation.

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[19] *Ibid.*

[20] *Ibid.*

[21] Gandharva's biographer Mohan Nadkarni states that his own 'early musical sensibilities' were 'nurtured and fostered' by these records, and that Gandharva cut about 200 discs of 78 rpm during his career, which retained their appeal despite imperfect recording quality; Nadkarni, *Bal Gandharva*, pp. vii, 61. Today's listener is not necessarily thus impacted by his available CDs.

[22] Khote, *Mi – Durga Khote*, p. 47.

But Gandharva remained unique in laying claim to popularity across linguistic and religious divides: Mumbai's large cosmopolitan audiences were so 'intoxicated' by Gandharva's *Svayamvar* as to see it more than 10 times.[23]

Obviously Gandharva had a stage presence in its myriad implications (as analysed in Western theatre history) and exuded magnetism.[24] In other words, he possessed the indefinable, intangible quality of 'It'.[25] This transformed him from an ordinary off-stage female impersonator to an extraordinarily charming on-stage woman: his photographs and contemporary descriptions bear witness to both. He was not born with this quality but acquired it after some years of stage experience. Interestingly and intriguingly, he could not project 'It' in his male roles.

## Cross-Dressing, Female Impersonation, and Homoeroticism

It has been suggested that the stigma attached to cross-dressing – especially men dressing as women – has usually been strong, given male superiority in most cultures: a man dressing as a woman is 'dressing down' and 'effeminate', while a woman dressing as a man is 'dressing up' and is therefore 'impertinent'.[26] Yet one wonders whether the stigma was possibly stronger in societies which mandated conspicuously different clothing for men and women – as for example in Western countries when men wore trousers or breeches, while women donned skirts of various lengths.

In 19th-century Maharashtra, male and female apparel had more similarities than were apparent at first glance. Men's lower garment or dhotar was an almost five-yard piece of white cloth tied at the waist, pleated in front, with the central hem of the pleats passed back

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[23] Tembe, *Maza Jivan-vihar*, p. 220.

[24] For a powerful discussion of the phenomenon, see Jane Goodall, *Stage Presence*, London: Routledge, 2008.

[25] Joseph Roach, 'It', *Theatre Journal* (The Johns Hopkins University Press), Vol. 56, No. 4, December 2004, 'Theorizing the Performer', pp. 555–68.

[26] Ann Thompson, 'Performing Gender: The Construction of Femininity in Shakespeare and Kabuki' in Minoru Fujita and Michael Shapiro (eds), *Transvestism and the Onnagata Traditions in Shakespeare and Kabuki*, Folkestone: Global Oriental, pp. 25–26.

through the legs and tucked in at the waist, so that both legs were loosely covered separately. Women's nine-yard sari was worn partly the same way. But then its additional portion – the padar – was passed under the right arm and over the left shoulder, covering the bosom and the midriff, the same as a modern six-yard sari, the difference being that it was then brought forward across the back to cover the right shoulder. Ideally, no portion of the blouse or upper arm would be visible, in the interest of female decorum. But what was often visible from the rear was the lower body from the waist down, revealing the contours of the buttocks divided by the vertical strip of the border. This graceful female dress has been immortalised by Raja Ravi Varma in his paintings of 'mythological' heroines.[27] Singer–actor Govindrao Tembe who had travelled widely in the East and West valorises this sari as the only female dress in the world which is 'so beautiful, graceful, and titillatingly arousing'.[28]

But the partial similarity of male and female dress did not erase the initial self-consciousness of stri-party lads; indeed some had moments of great reluctance and even self-loathing stemming from a feeling of threatened masculinity. In his school days Ganpatrao Bodas was excited about playing a small female part in a production by an amateur drama club, but when the time came for him to wear first a wig and then a sari, he put up a resistance: 'I am a man; how can I wear a sari?'[29] Ten-year-old Saudagar Gore (later Chhota Gandharva) refused to wear a sari for his debut performance and had to be coaxed in various ways.[30] Young V. Shantaram had joined Gandharva Company, carried away by the theatre glamour and Govindrao Tembe's encouragement to his father; besides he was much applauded for his flair for mimicry. In all this excitement he had forgotten that he would have to appear on stage in female dress. So he was in tears when first required to wear a sari for a song-and-dance performance in *Manapaman*.[31] So frustrated was he with the whole experience that he quit after a year and shaved off his head in

[27] Ravi Varma's beautiful model was Suranga Mulgaonkar of Mumbai (originally from a devdasi family of Goa) who entered into a permanent marriage-like arrangement with him; Desai, *Gomanta Saudamini*, pp. 12–14.

[28] Tembe, *Maza Jivan-vihar*, p. 160.

[29] Bodas, *Majhi Bhumika*, p. 18.

[30] Jathar, *Svara-sauharda*, p. 70.

[31] Shantaram, *Shantarama*, pp. 24.

case his long hair (obligatory for stri-parties) tempted him to enter theatre again. Parents of musically talented boys were always alert to the possibility of their being lured by theatre companies. On discovering young Govind Tembe's childhood obsession with singing, his father posed succinct, eloquent questions: 'Planning to run away and join a theatre company? Want to wear rich silk saris?' The boy vehemently denied any such desire and stopped singing, but continued to pick up the art of playing the harmonium whenever and wherever he could.[32] (In fact he elevated the harmonium to a solo musical instrument, entered theatre as an accompanist, and later played male roles.) All this of course does not imply that female impersonation is only or mainly about men cross-dressing.

But in Gandharva's case it was definitely about dressing attractively like a woman – and indeed more attractively than the contemporary woman. His penchant for rich silk saris, jewellery, and perfumes is well-known; and one of the reasons for his leaving Kirloskar Company was that the manager Shankarrao Mujumdar did not buy new saris for his role in *Vidyaharan*. He publicly proclaimed his protest by appearing on stage in a plain white sari, to everybody's shock and dismay.[33] Mujumdar let him sulk, but the resentment festered until Gandharva left the company to set up his own. Later when this company was heavily indebted, Gandharva squandered about Rs 20,000 – almost the entire earnings of the company's two-month stay in Solapur that were to be deposited in the bank – on new silk saris. The debt burgeoned with other expensive items he found essential especially for his role. Whether this was personal vanity or commitment to his roles has been debated.

To his admirers, Gandharva's beauty always seemed to be infused with refinement and decorum.[34] But others have stressed his leaning towards eroticism. He prided himself on setting new fashions that enhanced the contours of the female figure. In about 1915, he started wearing the five-yard sari in his role as Vasantasena in *Mrichchha-katik*, which was regarded as controversial and vulgar.[35] He introduced

[32] Tembe, *Maza Sangit-vyasang*, p. 4.

[33] Tembe, *Maza Jivan-vihar*, p. 145.

[34] P.L. Deshpande is emphatic about this, for example in 'Daya Chhaya Ghe', p. 195.

[35] Tembe, *Maza Jivan-vihar*, p. 173. The objection stemmed from the fact that the nine-yard sari sheathed both legs separately, and was regarded as

another explicitly erotic touch in the same play. It had become common to show Vasantasena drenched in the rain while keeping her tryst with Charudatta, and special sprinkler pipes were hung from the stage ceiling for the purpose.[36] Gandharva's innovation was to wear a fine muslin sari in the scene, to ensure near-total transparency. While a section of the audience savoured this, some found it obscene and registered a police complaint; and plainclothesmen were ordered to check the situation. Having received advance information, Tembe (a part-owner of Gandharva Company at the time) and others persuaded him with great difficulty to wear a thick sari for the scene, at least until the fear of police action was averted. But he harboured resentment a long time. Tembe's remark on the episode is equally telling: 'Hankering after something and obstinately demanding it was all Bal Gandharva knew; and he moved about within the orbit of those who admired him for it'.[37] But Gandharva's insistence on exhibiting his 'female' body to his male spectators is intriguing enough to invite an analysis of his psyche as a female impersonator.

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Cross-culturally, the two best-known theatre traditions of male cross-dressing are Shakespearean theatre in England and kabuki in Japan. Interestingly kabuki was founded by a woman in about 1600 and flourished as 'women's kabuki' until banned in 1629 for reasons of morality and suspicion of prostitution. Young boys then took over female roles; this was banned in 1653 for possibly encouraging homosexuality. The field was left open for only 'adult men's kabuki' which thrives to date. The core idea of this tradition is that the function of the female impersonator or *onnagata* progressed from 'mere substitution for a woman' to 'the creation of an ideal feminine form in body and spirit' – ideal 'from the point of view of a man in the particular society of the particular time, in which the necessity of

covering the whole body adequately. The five-yard (now six-yard) sari was associated with prostitutes at the time, although it became generally popular after some years – for which Gandharva is frequently given the credit.

[36] This filled the stage with muddied water and the actors involved contracted colds. But the scene was the magnet that drew the audiences; Tembe, *Maza Jivan-vihar*, p.111.

[37] *Ibid.*, pp. 173–74.

this female impersonation first came into being'.[38] An actor-centred entertainment, kabuki depended for its success on the personal charm and dancing skill of the onnagata – who is supposed to have looked more attractive than a real woman, and been more talented in acting than an actress. 'The onnagata first becomes a woman for the stage (without obliterating his manhood completely), and then plays "her" part, therefore the art of onnagata is more of an art than that of an actress'.[39] This reiterates the argument mentioned in the last chapter.

Two schools of onnagata emerged: the formalistic school believed in his 'acting as a woman', while the realistic school supported his 'living as a woman' and was best represented by the famous and utterly dedicated actor Yoshizawa Ayame (1673–1729) who lived his life 'as a woman, both offstage and on', although he was a husband and father, so that he could carry over the mannerisms of women more easily on to the stage.[40] There were other onnagatas who made it a practice 'to lead rather feminine lives, to live their art'.[41]

Actors' attitude to these professional compulsions varied. It is assumed that Shakespeare's boy actors were often uncomfortable playing women, which is why his comedies frequently used the device of 'female' characters assuming male disguise. A man playing a woman dressed as a man added to the hilarity of the situation, in addition to giving the actor a brief respite. However, it is also argued that a man impersonating a woman who cross-dresses as a man is more difficult to portray than a man simply acting a male character.[42]

The comparison of Shakespearean drama and kabuki leads Ann Thompson to conclude that the male actors are not 'playing' women but 'performing' women. They focus on the 'performance' of gender in a specific manner (gender itself being the performance of a social

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[38] Yoseharu Ozaki, 'Shakespeare and Kabuki' in Fujita and Shapiro (eds), *Transvestism*, p. 5.

[39] Ozaki, 'Shakespeare and Kabuki', p.11.

[40] Samuel Leiter in 'Female-Role Specialization in Kabuki: How Real is Real?' in Fujita and Shapiro (eds), *Transvestism*, pp. 70–81.

[41] Donald H. Shively, 'The Social Environment of Tokugawa Kabuki' in James R. Brandon, William P. Malm, and Donald H. Shively (eds), *Studies in Kabuki: Its Acting, Music, and Historical Context*, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1978, p. 41.

[42] Ozaki, 'Shakespeare and Kabuki', p. 13.

construct that is learnt) – in a 'more exaggerated, more graphic, more abstract' manner of theatrical codes. She also suggests that men perform as women for the gratification of male spectators, because in cinema as in theatre, the male gaze is privileged. The allure of the onnagata stems from the sole emphasis on and exaggeration of what are considered the most essential traits of a woman's gestures and speech – which are not natural to women in their general behaviour.[43] Thus one interpretation of the charm of female impersonators is that they portray an exaggerated, essentialised femininity which is far more appealing – especially to men – than natural femininity.

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Even the transitional society of the late-19th and early-20th century Maharashtra mandated a largely home-based existence for its women. Their hesitant entry into the public sphere for school and college education was limited to a few families until the mid-1920s. But a myth arose that Gandharva portrayed his contemporary progressive young women. One originator of the myth was Govindrao Tembe, Gandharva's co-star, who credits him with having transferred to the stage – even in his mythological roles – the contemporary, educated young woman, confident, free and playful in her speech and behaviour. This 'exact replica of a modern young woman made refined society view him as its own educated daughter, and both his contemporaries and elders felt a distinct affinity with him'.[44] But in real life not even girls from Westernised families were allowed such freedom at the time.

Though clearly anachronistic, this assessment became influential enough to be quoted frequently. The description fits women of the 1930s rather than those of the 1910s. Middle-class women's documented self-narratives and fiction of social realism depict their constraints quite vividly.[45] Even actor Bodas, later Gandharva's co-star, recalls his childhood experience as a lad of 12 in the late 1890s when his simple friendly chats with a married girl his age (living next door in the same wada) was found so objectionable by the girl's father-in-

[43] Thompson, 'Performing Gender'.

[44] Tembe, *Maza Jivan-vihar*, pp. 90–91.

[45] See for example, Kosambi, *Crossing Thresholds*; and Kosambi, *Women Writing Gender*.

law that he hit her hard on the back and abused him verbally for his 'immoral doings'.[46] Society had not changed much when Gandharva joined theatre in 1905, nor for a couple of decades thereafter.

The opportunities for mixing with women being so restricted, male attraction for stri-parties could be construed as simple heterosexual interest in surrogate women in the absence of real women. The strict sex-segregation mandated by the 19th-century upper-caste, middle-class society arguably made simulation of this kind titillating enough. Indirect evidence for this comes from H.N. Apte's novel *Madhali Sthiti* (The Transitional Phase, 1885) with its insightful and detailed description of Pune in the 1880s, which is inhabited among others by 'sybarites who consider it a heinous sin to waste a single precious opportunity to see Kirloskar's sangit natak as long as they have any life left in them – or even if they have to pawn their life'.[47] A decadent section of Brahmin society given to conspicuous consumption and sensual enjoyment draws into its net others, such as the adolescent Brahmin lads Ganpat ('Ganya') and his friend Nanya, who succumb to the lure of theatre companies and run away from home. Fair-skinned and delicate Ganya, effeminate since childhood, soon becomes a popular stri-party and the pivot of any performance. His beauty prompts his admirers to assert that God erred in creating him a man. He is also much in demand from older friends to cross-dress and serve them food and paan at informal all-male parties, when they vie with each other to caress his cheek or hold his hand, much to his annoyance. While preening and enjoying their attentions, Ganya remains strictly heterosexual, and the two friends boast about their visits to prostitutes. The significance of the description lies in Apte's astute characterisation and faithful account of even the seamier side of contemporary upper-caste society. But the episode is open to different interpretations and suggests an implicit or explicit homoerotic element.[48]

It is this element, male viewers' preference for transvestites, that Kathryn Hansen stresses in discussing female impersonation on stage, to counter the common argument of the unavailability of actresses.

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[46] Bodas, *Majhi Bhumika*, pp. 20–21.

[47] Apte, *Madhali Sthiti*, p. 199.

[48] I am indebted to Zameer Kamble, a theatre personality, for an exhaustive discussion of homoerotism.

She asserts that theatrical transvestism 'enabled actors to transform their own gender identities' and influenced 'viewing practices predicated on interest in transgender identification and the homoerotic gaze'.[49] Her sweeping study claims to include Parsi, Gujarati, and Marathi theatre of 'western India', but focuses mainly on Parsi theatre of Mumbai, during the 90-year period from 1850 to 1940. In Parsi theatre, Hansen argues, the paucity of women was not felt as a desideratum. On the contrary, female impersonators and actresses competed for female roles, enabling audience choices which often settled on men in preference to women.[50]

Hansen's extrapolation from this to Gujarati and Marathi theatre remains questionable, especially given the ethnic distinctiveness of Parsis which included a high degree of Anglicisation and freedom for women.[51] As for Marathi theatre, many actors of the musical stage played both types of roles: Bhaurao Kolhatkar and others successfully graduated from female to male roles in their 30s. Gandharva failed in this because audiences preferred him in female roles, though his younger contemporaries Dinanath Mangeshkar and Keshavrao Bhosale successfully played both roles at the same stage in their career. Second, singing ability was usually as important as – and sometimes more important than – acting ability; and 'respectable' families did not teach their daughters music, so that an acting career was a practical impossibility for them. Third, there was hardly any 'competition' between male and female actors for female roles on the Marathi stage: women's entry into theatre as competitors practically ended the era of female impersonation.

Gandharva's contemporary accounts endorse the changing mindset – at least of the majority of the spectators – that preferred actresses in women's roles. The artificiality of female impersonation had begun to prompt attempts to induct women singers into theatre companies. In fact Govindrao Tembe had striven to acquire actresses ever since he saw women on the Parsi stage, about the start of Gandharva Company in 1913, and perceived an alternative to the unattractive

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[49] Hansen, 'Theatrical Transvestism in the Parsi, Gujarati and Marathi Theatres', p. 59.

[50] *Ibid.*, p. 64.

[51] Hansen's material on Marathi theatre is insufficient and she makes uncorroborated suggestions such as the homosexual element in Bal Gandharva's friendship with Balasaheb Pandit (p. 72).

male impersonators.[52] His chance came in the 1920s while coaching the Badodekar sisters in stage music and helping them plan their family-owned theatre. A formal contract was drawn up, with Tembe only in an advisory role, when they suddenly changed their mind.[53] Tembe himself consistently propagated through his writings the need to induct women into theatre, from about 1920. When the Badodekar family later started a theatre wing of their music school, Hirabai was inspired by the ideology of female roles for actresses. With her sisters she made a substantial dent in this male monopoly in the late 1920s, although their stage careers were short-lived, being prioritised lower than their musical careers.

Another attempt was made in 1928 by S.N. (alias Nanasaheb) Chapekar who had just turned from female to male roles and wanted an actress to play opposite him. He tried to test Amir Jan and Gauhar Jan (later Gauharbai) Karnataki, and found that the latter had already rehearsed many of Bal Gandharva's songs and could speak a little Marathi. Chapekar even arranged for her to sing individually in the jalsa scene in his *Samshaya-kallol* once. But the difficulty of coaching her in Marathi roles led him to abandon the idea.[54] (In the late 1930s she joined Gandharva Company.)

Actresses in female roles became the norm in the 1930s with Jyotsna Bhole and her successors, and did indeed adversely affect female impersonators. Another contributory factor was the fierce competition from cinema – an alternative medium of mass entertainment whose appeal was considerably enhanced by actresses. There was hardly a period when actresses competed against, or lost to, female impersonators.

But Hansen rightly stresses the cultural exchange inherent in the development of the Marathi, Parsi, and Gujarati theatres in the late 19th century, although this occurred only within the confines of the multi-lingual and multi-cultural Mumbai which – because of its British mercantile origins – was 'in Maharashtra' but not 'of it'; the

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[52] Tembe, *Maza Jivan-vihar*, p. 217.

[53] *Ibid.*, p. 270.

[54] Chapekar, *Smriti-dhan*, pp. 178–79. Chapekar mentions in passing that Kamalabai Gokhale née Kamat had left Natyakala-prasarak Mandali in about 1930 (p. 202). In the early 1930s Sulochana Palkar also acted in *Samshaya-kallol* opposite Chapekar; she later established Sulochana Sangit Mandali (pp. 206–07).

rest of the region remained linguistically quite homogeneous and well-developed.[55]

To return to the central point, female impersonators have been associated with homoerotic or homosexual behaviour, and with reason. The practice probably started with stri-parties in tamashas and continued through stylised mythologicals, but factual accounts are understandably rare, given the unwillingness of theatre historians to discuss so sensitive a matter in what was – and still remains – a puritanical society. A rare incident which has been mentioned (by theatre historian Banahatti) relates to Balwantrao Marathe who later headed Nutan Sanglikar Mandali. Young Bala had started as a stri-party in the original Sanglikar Mandali, and graduated to a dev-party. In the mid-1860s, some older and intoxicated actors made overtures to him, and he left the company in a fit of rage.[56] (The vulnerability of boys recruited as stri-parties has already been touched upon in Chapter 8.)

Stories are told of male co-actors' reactions to Gandharva's magnetism. He owned up to nervousness when the tall and hefty Madhavrao Walawalkar, playing Dushyant in *Shakuntal*, often got carried away in his romantic overtures to Shakuntala in Act III.[57] Gangadharpant Londhe described 'a unique thrill' passing through his veins in Gandharva's proximity on stage in a female persona – a sensation he never experienced in the nearness of real-life women.[58] This suggests an undercurrent of homoeroticism – although it is not known whether Londhe had enjoyed proximity with a consciously seductive woman such as the one portrayed by Gandharva; the

[55] Hansen's assumption that, '[t]he stage medium was fluid and polyglot; modern forms of the languages had not yet been established, and the association of community and region with linguistic identity was yet to become fixed' in the mid- to late 19th century ('Theatrical Transvetism', p. 60), does not hold. Marathi as a language in its own right is held to have been firmly established by about 1290 with the composition of the *Dnyaneshwari*, a verse translation–commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita*, which was followed by centuries of verse compositions transmitted mostly orally and sometimes via manuscripts. Archival material, including correspondence and chronicles, was preserved in aristocratic or other eminent families. Marathi literary prose writing was well established by the mid-19th century.

[56] Banahatti, *Marathi Rangabhumicha Itihas*, p. 188.

[57] Desai, *Makhamalicha Padada*, p. 50.

[58] Nadkarni, *Balgandharva and the Marathi Theatre*, p. 106.

respectable family women a middle-class man usually interacted with were never coquettish.

The complexity of sexual ambivalence towards female impersonators, and their self-perception, is brought out relatively recently by the noted playwright Satish Alekar in *Begum Barve* set in the mid-20th century.[59] The ageing, unemployed, eponymous stri-party dreamily lingers on in the heyday of musical theatre although he had played only secondary roles. This is an escape from the dreary present when he is homosexually exploited and even battered by Shyamrao, a *tonga*-driver who alone offers him shelter and protection.[60] In the interestingly complex narrative, two lower-middle-class bachelor clerks spin a long fantasy based on Barve's female identity to the extent of believing that s/he is married to one of them and is expecting his child.

Notwithstanding this association between stri-parties and homosexuality, no such scandal was ever attached to Gandharva. Durga Khote vouches for his conformist behaviour:

> [Enacting] female roles was his profession – a very attractive profession. But I do not remember that profession ever having gone beyond the limelight. We visited him often; he too visited us frequently. We organised his late-evening musical concerts at Christmas parties at our house in Lonavla. Naturally he stayed overnight. But never did a situation arise that would embarrass anyone. His conduct was very decent and simple.[61]

There do exist anecdotes of Bal Gandharva in female dress being taken for drives in an open horse carriage (known as a 'Victoria'), by Mumbai's wealthy Gujarati merchants; but they are possibly apocryphal. At any rate the drives did not seem to have led to other things.

Gandharva's aura of respectability allowed women access to his performances. Families which forbade their women to see films in the 1920s and 1930s happily took them along to the theatre to see him.

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[59] Satish Alekar, *Begum Barve*, Pune: Neelkanth Prakashan, 2008 (1979). The play has been translated and performed in various Indian languages.

[60] A *tonga* was a one-horse carriage to ferry passengers in Pune (and other towns) before the advent of the auto-rickshaws in the 1950s (see Plate 13.1). Shyamrao contemptuously bestows on Barve his mare's name – 'Begum'.

[61] Khote, *Mi – Durga Khote*, p. 43.

This relaxation of the strict gender code was not necessarily extended to other theatre companies.

By far the worst problem in Gandharva's career was the inescapability of ageing: neither he nor his admirers could come to terms with it. Having spent his best years trying to create the ideal and ever-young woman (mostly as a desirable, lovelorn bride like Subhadra or Rukmini, or a perfect young wife like Sindhu), he could not convincingly play a mature woman or a man. Most other female impersonators had opted for male roles at the right time, in their early 30s. Keshavrao Bhosale and Dinanath played both male and female roles even in their prime (as mentioned earlier), which speaks volumes for their acting talent. Gandharva's narrow specialisation – as a young and attractive female – made his other roles unconvincing and unpopular; he was trapped in his own alluring creation.

This comes across forcefully in his film roles. In Prabhat's *Dharmatma* he played Sant Eknath, portrayed as a gentle devotee of Viththal, and a soft-spoken, committed social reformer – a role tailormade for the androgenous qualities associated with a longtime female impersonator. But his lifeless performance wasted a good opportunity. In P.L. Deshpande's words, he looked like an expert horseman who had suddenly been seated for the first time on a bicycle and pushed into a busy market street.[62] Worse was his 'stage-talkie' *Sadhvi Meerabai* made in collaboration with Baburao Ruikar, which was merely the filming of his live stage performance of V.S. Desai's play *Amrit-siddhi* with a static camera, with him in the lead role. Even without close-ups, the camera caught the artificiality of the ageing Gandharva posturing as a young woman alongside other female impersonators sharing the stage with him. His attempt to look young and attractive (in transparent georgette saris) and act coy was nothing short of pathetic.

What shines in contrast is a parallel performance by Vishnupant Pagnis (also a former stri-party) as Sant Tukaram in the eponymous film, which won great acclaim and international awards, precisely on the strength of his androgenous attributes of gentleness and softness. Among other former stri-parties successful in male film roles were Vishnupant Aundhkar, and especially Keshavrao Date who played a manly man both in plays like *Andhalyanchi Shala* and in films like

[62] P.L. Deshpande, 'Ek Hoti Prabhat-nagari' in Watve, *Ek Hoti Prabhat-nagari*, p. 10.

*Kunku* (see Plate 14.1). What the camera lays bare in Gandharva's case is his inability to play convincingly not only a male role but even a (young) female role after a certain age. Such entrapment in role specialisation came arguably only with intense cross-gender, age-specific identification in performance.

## A Dual Self: The Female Impersonator's Split Gaze

Whether popular female impersonators developed a more narcissistic personality than other successful actors is a moot point, but their dual self can be assumed. The female impersonator's success depended on responding to his role simultaneously as a man and a woman – by dreaming up an attractive woman whom he desired as a man, and then bringing her to life through his stage persona. This dual self was crucial because, as with Gandharva, he knew where male desire was located and could address it skilfully.

Marathi theatre did not have a parallel to an onnagata committed to living life as a woman. (The only female attribute that stayed with stri-parties was their long hair, knotted and well-hidden). But the on-stage commitment to be a woman was most successfully displayed by Gandharva who submerged himself in his female characters to the extent of creating the 'New Maharashtrian Woman'. My two-fold argument is that this New Woman was a creation of his split gaze, and also that it was illusory.

This New Woman was pretty and aware of her charms, fashionable but not vulgarly provocative. She was coy and charming, but also modest and at times shy. She was utterly feminine though surprisingly free from the constraints placed upon upper-caste women's behaviour, talk, and movement even within the domestic sphere. Thus she conversed freely and at times even joked with the menfolk in the family or with the man she loved. She could infuse the most innocuous sentence with romance, as for example Rukmini in *Svayamvar* indicating Krishna's arrival to her older brother: '*Dada, te ale na*!' ('Dada, look, "he" has come!'). Gandharva is said to have expressed Rukmini's excitement by repeating the line a dozen or more times with different inflections. By far his most famous line was Rukmini's '*Khada marayachach zala tar* . . .' ('If you must fling a stone at me . . .'), in the same play, when she playfully warns Krishna (in a daydreaming monologue) against throwing a pebble at the clay water-pot on her head and naughtily watching her wet body (see cover photo).

These lines were to share cultural immortality along with other innocuous lines from Bollywood films, such as Shashi Kapur's '*Mere pas Ma hai*!' ('I have mother with me!') in *Deewar* (1975), or Amjad Khan's '*Kitne admi the*?' ('How many men were there?') in *Sholay* (1975), and Humphrey Bogart's 'Play it again, Sam!' in Hollywood's *Casablanca* (1942) – which immediately conjure up a whole cine-cultural universe.

Gandharva's versatility in portraying female roles was considered unparallelled: whether it was 'a shy Rukmini, a nervous Subhadra, a lovelorn Bhamini, a distressed Draupadi, a pathetic Sindhu, or a coquettish Rewati'.[63] He is alleged to have played each of these characters as if that was the only portrayal possible, unravelling the emotional core of each.[64] He excelled as Gadkari's Sindhu – the ultimate pativrata of the stage, the patriarchal dream of the subservient, patient, self-sacrificing woman – in a role specially written for him in *Ekach Pyala*. Sindhu considers herself blessed in serving her husband even when he turns into an alcoholic, kills their infant son before her eyes, and then kills her. She dies happily at his feet, with Desdemona-like devotion. Many men, including P.L. Deshpande have said that the emotion with which Gandharva infused the role has not been equalled even by good actresses in later times.[65] He ascribes this to their lack of total self-immersion in the role for which Gandharva was famous. But it is also apparent to any woman that a modern actress is unlikely to empathise deeply enough with this role to play it convincingly. In playing the tragic Sindhu, Gandharva was catering to his own patriarchal ideal of a submissive wife.

But Gandharva's New Woman was illusory even as he created her, because of the prevalent gender code which mandated seclusion of women within the average middle-class upper-caste home, and their exclusion from the public sphere. Until the early 1900s, a young woman in this conventional setting had no occasion to talk to men of any age (except young boys); she saw men only at mealtimes when communication was impossible. Surrounded by women through the day, she could meet her husband only at night. While talking to her elders, she had to lower her head. These norms were relaxed only in exceptionally Westernised families, but even they opted

[63] Nadkarni, *Bal Gandharva*, p. 61.

[64] Desai, *Balgandharva*, pp. 189–90.

[65] P.L. Deshpande, 'Bhashan Char' in Shanta Shelke (ed.), *Shroteho!*, Mumbai: Parachure Prakashan Mandir, 2000, pp. 80–81.

for arranged marriages and adherence to convention. Presumably Gandharva himself played the conventional male gender role in his personal life and had an insider's understanding of male desire and female constraints.

Gandharva was also famous for giving the – male – audiences what they wanted. More than any other actor of his time, he went all out to please them. Arguably, in creating a woman to please male spectators, he also pleased himself, sharing their expectations. Ann Thompson makes the point that 'the privileged spectator is a man – women in the audience must adopt the so-called male gaze', and poses the – rhetorical – question: 'Are men performing as women for the gratification of other men?'[66] I would agree and only add: 'And for their own gratification as men.'

Another point Thompson makes is that female impersonators do not merely imitate women – they single out 'the most essential traits of a woman's gestures and speech' for special emphasis. These reconstructed 'essentialised' female characters therefore appear more feminine than natural women.

Thus we have the situation that Gandharva created a stage woman as a role model for real women to emulate. But this lay well outside the realm of possibility – as all his contemporaries knew. What he held out before men (and women) was a tantalising and tremendously attractive vision of what a woman could and should be. But the same men had interiorised the need to control women at all times. Even if they were free of the pressures of the extended family – which was highly unlikely – they would not have had the courage to allow their wives even superficially the freedom that Gandharva's New Woman had appropriated. It is safe to assume that no girl of the 1920s (or even later) would have dared to openly and repeatedly express her delight that the man she fancied had arrived at her doorstep by declaring '*Dada, te ale na*!' Had she done so, any brother would have unleashed verbal and even physical violence to send her scurrying into the room reserved for women, or, in a Westernised home, locked her up in her own room until she came to her senses.

For women, Gandharva was supposed to have set the fashion. His way of tightly draping the nine-yard sari and new style of dressing his hair certainly held a special appeal, although only the very small fashionable elite of Mumbai had the courage and freedom to

[66] Thompson, 'Performing Gender'.

emulate him.[67] The renowned actor and playwright Girish Karnad tells an anecdote about his mother, then barely in her teens, dressing up like Gandharva and imitating his mannerisms in the strict privacy of her room, along with female cousins her age.[68] That the seemingly unobjectionable behaviour was possible only behind closed doors in the 1910s in Pune reveals the curtain of inhibitions through which women viewed Gandharva. Thus his vision of the New Woman, so near and yet so far, was an inevitable source of frustration for both men and women.[69]

## 'Willing Suspension of Disbelief': Audience Complicity in the Sex–Gender Paradox

Theatre audiences were complicit in the sex–gender paradox on stage – provided the attractively portrayed woman was confined to the stage and not allowed to enter the home, and further, provided that she was played by a man on stage. This last was crucial because respectable women did not appear on stage to entertain men; a man playing a woman, even a coquette, guaranteed that female respectability was not violated.

Thus my last point is the paradox at the heart of successful female impersonation. Gandharva's feminine wiles were attractive because the audience was secure in the knowledge of his being a man; it could enjoy coquetry in Gandharva as much as it would have detested it in an actress. (The possibly homoerotic interest of some spectators naturally enhanced their enjoyment.)

This also enabled his – and any female impersonator's – physical proximity with other male actors on stage. The late Dr Ashok Ranade used to tell the story of Hirabai Badodekar's early experiences of the musical stage. Once while playing Bhamini-as-Vanamala in *Manapaman*, she was required to fan Dhairyadhar (who was played by an actor other than her brother) in one scene. She stood almost in the wings while he sat on the other side of the stage, because a woman fanning a man was an act of intimacy (except in a servant).[70]

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[67] My mother was careful to stress that the generality of middle-class women even in Mumbai enjoyed no such freedom.

[68] Personal communication.

[69] I am grateful to the late Prof. Ram Bapat for emphasising this point.

[70] Personal communication.

Obviously, if a flesh-and-blood actress had acted coy and thrown sidelong glances at her supposed beau, she would have been booed off the stage and severely censured. (This explains the need for Hirabai to be protected by her brother, Sureshbabu Mane, as the male lead opposite her.)

In the absence of the requisite audience complicity Gandharva's magic lost much of its sheen, as described by the author Madhav Manohar.[71] His contemporary young men of the 1920s displayed a photo of Gandharva in female dress, in the manner of today's film actresses as pin-ups. In the total absence of actresses, it was he who shaped male ideas of female beauty. Manohar objects both to the phenomenon of female impersonation and to Gandharva's short stature inclining towards stoutness which could not suggest feminine delicateness. Further, his coy manner was at variance with the heroines of mythology (Subhadra, Rukmini, Draupadi, and Savitri) he portrayed. The artificiality of his acting was thus aggravated. This lack of acting skill, according to Manohar, was exposed by the superb performance of Bodas as Sindhu's husband in *Ekach Pyala.* Manohar's other major objection was to the musical play itself – because music marred a play by turning it into a concert. And Gandharva's mystique derived mainly from his singing: in fact his title 'Bal Gandharva' refers to his singing and not his acting.

Even the proponents of female impersonation were not always won over by Gandharva. Arguably his strongest – and indeed virulent – critic was the blunt and outspoken 'Ahitagni' Rajwade who found him wanting in every respect in comparison with his predecessor Bhaurao Kolhatkar whom he idolised. He complained that Gandharva did not possess a divine voice like Bhaurao's and was unable to create musical magic, but only 'ground out' the same trill-like combination of notes in an uninspired and boring manner without variation – although he successfully 'lured' the public for a while. Rajwade criticised the fact that Gandharva changed the placement of the accompanists from the wings to a prominent space in front of the stage. As for his female impersonations, Rajwade found Gandharva's transparent saris vulgar and revealing, preferring Bhaurao's simple and dignified dress. Finally he criticised Gandharva's 'disloyal' conduct in leaving Kirloskar

[71] Madhav Manohar, 'Balgandharva: Akhyayika ani Vastav' in *Rasaranga: Balgandharva Janma-shatabdi Visheshanka*, 27 June 1987, pp. 20–26.

Company. The only attractive thing about Gandharva seemed to him to be his special skill in 'standing in the shape of India'.[72] The mysterious metaphor presumably referred to the *tribhanga* pose, which involved three 'breaks' or bends – at the neck, waist, and one knee – sketching a gentle 'S', as seen in some classical dance forms, sculpture and paintings. Even Gandharva's devotee P.L. Deshpande has reported his wife's total disillusionment on seeing him for the first time ('Is *this* Bal Gandharva?') – though this happened during his declining years.[73]

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Gandharva's multi-faceted greatness lay predominantly in his singing, in a voice naturally suited to both female and male roles. (Some female impersonators with a robust masculine voice spoke and sang in a falsetto.[74]) Clear enunciation, proper emphasis, and ability to enter into the sentiment of a song – acting it out instead of merely singing it – were his special achievements. Also he could infuse life into any role by submerging himself into the character, transcending mere impersonation.[75] Most importantly, he created, through his illusory New Woman, the dream of a charming female persona melding colonial modernity with conventional conduct and a social setting which enabled this.



[72] Rajwade, *Ahitagni Rajwade Atmavritta.*

[73] Deshpande, 'Daya Chhaya Ghe', p. 197.

[74] V.S. Desai (*Makhamalicha Padada*, p. 48) gives the example of Sadashivrao Ranade who did this for 17 years without the public suspecting it was not his natural voice.

[75] The general awkwardness of some female impersonators is visible in Phalke's early films, especially *Raja Harishchandra* and *Kalia-mardan* (although these were not skilled professionals) and even in Gandharva's *Sadhvi Meerabai.*

# 12

# Drama as a Mode of Discourse

The narrative of modern Marathi literature was rooted deeply enough in the ethos of social and political regeneration to render inevitable the deployment of drama as a mode of discourse. Intricately woven into the discourses, from the embattled social reform measures to the explosive assertion of anti-colonial nationalism, were various images of the 'ideal woman', ranging from a submissive pativrata to a militant metaphor for the nation subjected to colonial coercion.

## Social Reform Discourse

Drama was treated as a literary genre as much as a performative medium of entertainment and a medium for disseminating ideas. Its literary trajectory differed widely from that of the novel whose provenance and early sustenance was the social reform movement. Starting with salient reform issues such as abolishing child marriage and enforced widowhood, and encouraging women's education, the classic novelists progressed to protesting against other forms of women's oppression and against gendered double standards of morality, while supporting women's search for selfhood. This later phase was buttressed by women's own entry into the field of fiction.[1] Drama generally paled in comparison as an effective discursive medium, partly because of its obligation to entertain and partly because of the paucity of women dramatists. Access to a theatre company willing to accept a script and present it on stage was not easy even for relatively experienced male dramatists; for women dramatists it must have seemed insurmountable. The financial outlay involved in staging a

[1] For a discussion, see Kosambi, 'Introduction' in *Women Writing Gender*, pp. 1–77.

play also deterred discursive themes and prioritised popular appeal. Significantly, only two women succeeded as playwrights, and then again in a small way: Hirabai Pednekar with friends among theatre personalities and Girijabai Kelkar ensconced within a literary support structure of family and friends.

Ensuring financial viability meant catering to the large conservative and anti-reform majority. Even the supposedly reformist plays were diluted by the need to add attractions. The first 'social' play, M.B. Chitale's *Manorama* (1871), addressed the sad plight of widows in a counter-productive manner. Instead of generating sympathy for widows – and for dissatisfied married women – who could be lured into adultery, it painted such women as debauched in rather gaudy colours.

With Tilak's ascendance in the 1890s, his socially conservative faction dominated drama, mainly through its most consistent and outspoken champion N.B. Kanitkar whose *Taruni-shikshan-natika* (1886) equated reform with undesirable Westernisation. It paints the dire future effects of women's 'modern' (or 'ornamental' and thus useless) education and their 'emancipation' (construed as licentiousness), if the current 'pernicious' trends continue unchecked.[2] Significantly, Kanitkar admiringly cites an extract from *Kesari* (5 January 1886) in his lengthy preface:

> We and our wives do not want to turn into Sahebs and Madams [i.e. Englishmen and women]. We and our wives want to achieve progress as speedily as possible, but while retaining our Aryan-ness. We should resolve to remain Hindus to the end. If we or our women imitate the Sahebs, we will be reduced to the status of converts or Eurasians. No country, class, or individual has grown in stature through imitation. Foreign things should be accepted in such a manner that they become part of us.[3]

Kanitkar's typically conservative strategy is to project social reform as an unpalatable and harmful foreign import, and to promote the desirable ideal of perpetuating the patriarchal control over women in a slightly relaxed form.

His parody's main attraction is ridiculing the few women visible in public life. A Pandita Ramabai-like figure runs the Arya Mahila

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[2] Kanitkar, *Taruni-shikshana-natika.*

[3] Kanitkar, 'Prastavana' in *Ibid.*, p. 13.

Hotel (in a pointed allusion to Ramabai's Arya Mahila Samaj) where European women teachers lead young women astray, and a Rakhmabai clone casually divorces her husband and flirts with her male teacher.[4] The allusions to Rakhmabai's two articles to *The Times of India* (1884) under the pen name of 'A Hindu Lady' and Pandita Ramabai's conversion to Christianity in England are woven into Kanitkar's pervasive *Kesari*-style sarcasm in his Introduction:

> Some say that we marry off our daughters while they are too young and ignorant, that we push our widows into the ocean of grief for their entire lifetime, that we turn our wives into slaves, that we do not give them the same education that we receive, or grant them equal rights, or allow them respite from their domestic routine, or let them experience even a whiff of freedom and reform – how ignorant, hard-hearted, cruel, and selfish we [men] are! Some among our ruling class advise us to reform our home, family, and society first, before interfering in matters political … Many modern Gargis [i.e. learned women] among us, adorned with an English education, are engaged in making heart-rending speeches at women's meetings to expose to the world the stupidity and selfishness of their men. Many women who have mastered the art of writing in English are exerting themselves ceaselessly to attain women's emancipation by writing lengthy articles in newspapers regarding the grievous condition of Aryan women. Some Aryan women have even taken a sip of the nectar of the holy Bible of Jesus, and taken up permanent residence on the banks of the most holy Thames in England; they are now making efforts to open our eyes wide by writing learned essays from there on many topics, such as, when and how Aryan women will be freed from the slavery of men, when they will finally escape the clutches of their bigoted parents and begin to enter into love marriages, when they will break off the shackles of the sacred vows and injunctions forced on them by the Hindu religion and embrace the True Faith. Our modern, learned men have gone to the extent of bringing to fruition the new, ornamental education for women and their emancipation.[5]

Interestingly, Kanitkar claims to be a social reformer because he does not 'harbour the base view that women are mere objects of gratification or meant only for toil and labour and to be treated as such'. His notion of 'true' reform is to treat them like 'ornaments of

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[4] For the Rakhmabai court case, see Kosambi, 'Resisting Conjugality' in *Crossing Thresholds*, pp. 237–73.

[5] Kanitkar, 'Prastavana' in *Taruni-shikshana-natika*, p. 4.

the home'. Women – being 'naturally beautiful, lovely, pretty' – should be given 'the kind of education that would make them excellent housewives, adept at domestic tasks, and that would augment their beauty and religious-moral conduct'; they should not be taxed with anything that requires 'mental exertion'. This alone would avert the harmful effects described in the play.[6]

A serious and effective effort at social reform was delayed until Deval's *Sharada* (1899) protested against the practice of very young girls being 'sold' in marriage to rich old men by greedy fathers, further impelled by the custom of mandatory pre-pubertal marriages for girls. So close was the play's association with raising the age at marriage in the public mind that Maharashtra still knows the Child Marriage Restraint Act or Sarda Act (1929) as 'Sharada Act'.

S.K. Kolhatkar uncompromisingly pushed forward the social reform agenda, exposing the hypocrisy and double standards of both reformers and anti-reformers in *Mati-vikar* (1906).[7] The villainous priest Hariharshastri openly boasts: 'If we [men] are manly enough, we can ruin any woman we want. But women do not have that freedom. "A woman does not deserve independence" [as the *Manusmriti* states]' (Act I, Scene 3). The dialogue succinctly captures different positions vis-à-vis reform: Vihar champions all old customs as desirable, deriding all new custom as useless, and Manohar retorts that he should then stop travelling by train, and dispatch camelback messengers instead of running to the post office. 'What applies to other reforms also applies to widow remarriage' (Act III, Scene 2). The wickedness of anti-reformers is also exposed:

> Hariharshastri: 'Look, Manoharpant, every family needs a widow to do housework . . . [M]any families do not have a widow, so the mistress of the house is compelled to do laborious tasks such as washing clothes, mopping floors, and cooking. Would the custom of remarriage increase or decrease these difficulties? . . . Besides, widows do not feel the need for remarriage. Their innate affectionateness is satisfied by looking after the children of relatives and friends.'
>
> Manohar: 'If widows were to be so easily satisfied, why would things like abortion and foeticide be so common among them?'

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[6] *Ibid.*, pp. 15–16.

[7] Kolhatkar, *Sangit Mati-vikar.*

Interestingly, Kolhatkar's self-proclaimed disciple, Gadkari, contents himself with presenting both the reformist and anti-reformist positions equally strongly in *Prem-sannyas* (1912).[8] Jayant tries to convince his beloved Leela, a child-widow, to disregard the opinion of their 'lifeless, cowardly society' (Act II, Scene 5):

> How can this society be worth-respecting – this society which prides itself on wringing the necks of widows, denying them an education, and trampling them underfoot in a brutal manner? Alas! What a dreadful contrast between the constraints placed on the behaviour of women and protective freedom provided to men by the same religion! If a married couple is parted [by death] the decorative hair on the widow's head is removed and the widower's head is decorated with the ornament worn during the wedding [for immediate remarriage]! ... Leela, who would bother about a society given to such double standards of justice?

But Gadkari's resolution to the problem is cautious and conservative. Jayant does not marry Leela. She commits suicide, and with her dying breath makes him promise to lead a celibate life and work for the welfare of widows. Kolhatkar showed widow remarriage on stage in 1906; Gadkari lacked his guru's courage six years later, and gradually turned more conservative.

An excellent case in point is his iconic *Ekach Pyala* (1917) where impassioned reformist polemic is ultimately overshadowed by the triumph of patriarchy.[9] Gadkari's clear awareness of the magnitude of India's urgent problems is articulated by his spokesman Ramlal who explains to his young protégé Bhagirath that 'India's future happiness cannot be attained by a single "royal path" leading to public welfare', adding:

> On one side is political reform, on the other social reform. There is religion to think of, and also industry, education, the woman question. Here is the matter of untouchability, and there the confusion of caste distinctions ... The advocates of political reform do not hesitate to trample over the weak hearts of widows on their way; and those who exclusively champion social reform are so engrossed in putting the *kunku* on the foreheads of widows that they are unable to spare a thought for the widowhood of our Mother India! Those who harbour a false pride for the Arya-dharma want to hoist

[8] Gadkari, *Prem-sannyas*, pp. 1–135.
[9] Gadkari, *[Sangit] Ekach Pyala*, pp. 347–465.

> the flag of this religion as high as possible and, swept by this religious pride, they construct [a pedestal of] the skeletons of six crore Mahars and Mangs. The so-called protectors of Shudras and Ati-shudras, instead of raising them, try to pull down the Brahmin community … Extensive public education seems at present to be the only path that will light up all others, although it may not be sufficient to carry us to the ultimate good (Act III, Scene 3).

This seemingly balanced overview barely conceals the patriarchal mindset: a husband infuses meaning into his wife's life and therefore has total control and authority over her. A widow – who has lost her husband and thus has only an empty and meaningless life – is an object of pity and needs to be 'uplifted'; but a wife, no matter how brutally treated by her husband, does not need help because her moral duty – her dharma – is to serve her husband with utmost devotion and endure his brutality. (Gadkari's description of a pativrata is discussed in a sub-section below).

Even in the matter of widow remarriage Gadkari takes for granted – as did practically all reformers – that only a child (i.e. virgin) widow could be remarried. A woman already stamped as the sexual property of one man could not be transformed to another. Gadkari's concern for the suffering of widows is genuine enough. His Bhagirath says to Sharad: 'Any honest person would have to admit that you, widows, are terribly humiliated in Hindu society – either because of religion, or custom, or male selfishness' (Act III, Scene 3). Again, Ramlal comments on the silent suffering of widows:

> What can a poor Hindu widow ever say? Proud of our Arya-dharma, we laughed derisively to hear the novel Christian principle that a cow has no soul. But oppressive brutes like me have deprived these abject [cow-like] women not just of their souls but even of their tongues!' (Act V, Scene 3).

Furthermore, Gadkari admits the salience of physical appearance even in the case of widows. Ramlal tells the newly-widowed Gita with brutal frankness:

> Our society does not yet have the comprehensive kind of reform that would generate sympathy for an ugly widow like you! … Even to feel pity for a destitute child widow, we need the support of a pretty face. Our reform is still restricted to our eyes!' (Act V, Scene 3).

At about the same time, in *Hach Mulacha Bap* (1916), Varerkar raised the issue of dowry demands – the despair of needy parents of marriageable girls. The impoverished Digambarpant, anxious for his daughter's future, describes the plight of an unmarried, grown-up girl who is considered unworthy of mixing in society or taking part in social functions, subjected to painful verbal barbs – and practically ostracised (Act I, Scene 2).

## Political Discourse

The general Tilakite dominance transferred militant nationalism to theatre, in the guise of mythological, historical, and even imaginary themes. Among the coterie of his overt adherents such as Khare-shastri and Vir Joshi, the most powerful was Khadilkar.

Khadilkar's first play *Sawai Madhavrao Yancha Mrityu* (The Death of Sawai Madhavrao, 1906), though not political, contains enough anti-British sentiment.[10] Nana Phadnis, for example, boasts that he would warn the *topiwale* or hat-wearers (i.e. generic Europeans, in this case the English) of Calcutta and Mumbai that their interference in Maratha affairs would lead to their Mumbai being conquered as was Vasai from the *firangi*s (i.e. Portuguese) (Act I, Scene 3). Again, in response to the East India Company's request for permission to trade in the Maratha territories, Phadnis explains to Madhavrao their trading strategy and paints a prescient picture:

> These seafarers tried earlier to introduce their swords and guns into Pune, with willing support from Raghoba; but their plot failed. So now they are trying to introduce their weighing scales into our kingdom! The [Mughal] Badshah granted them permission to trade; and how did they help him? They gained entry into Calcutta, and gobbled up Bengal while selling bangles in their shop, didn't they? This is their trading skill! . . . Sarkar, we do not need this pretext of English trade in our domain. Sarkar, had Shivaji Maharaj not established swaraj in Maharashtra, had your ancestors not cleft the throne of Delhi and extended our empire over all of Hindustan, I am convinced that the Badshah of Delhi would not now be a prisoner of the Peshwa's sardars. Instead, the weighing scales of the English would be displayed on the throne of Delhi! (Act I, Scene 3).

Khadilkar's *Kanchangadchi Mohana* is a story of political allegiance and betrayal, with a strong love motif, played out in the aftermath of

[10] Khadilkar, *Sawai Madhavrao Yancha Mrityu.*

the defeat of Hindu Vijayanagar by the Muslim kingdom of Bijapur.[11] But the protagonist Prataprao's longing for self-rule and chafing against political 'slavery' were intended to resonate with the Maharashtrian resentment against British rule, eight decades after the Peshwa's defeat. The unidimensional Prataprao has dedicated his life to protecting a small enclave within the former Vijayanagar domain: in the barely disguised parallel, his contestation of liberal leaders for colluding with the imperial power is vocal. The initial dialogue between Prataprao and Pilajirao Mane (who ultimately betrays him) sets the tone:

> Prataprao: '. . . Our people have been constantly kowtowing to the [Muslim] foreigners and have become useless and worthless; they have lost all their former pride and lustre . . .'
>
> Pilajirao: '. . . Prataparao, we are unable to suddenly discard our excellent virtue of serving loyally those whose bread we eat.'
>
> Prataparao: '. . . These sardars of Vijayanagar – they boast about being "the first among slaves"! . . . Mane, who eats whose bread? These robbers destroyed Vijayanagar and raked in its wealth – their ancestors had not brought it with them. This is our wealth! That golden palace, that gem-studded throne – all that is ours, amassed by our forefathers after years of labour' (Act I, Scene 2).

Prataprao goes on to expound on 'the male sex which is compelled to face all the humiliation of slavery, . . . to stifle proud minds inside grieving bodies, and which is therefore dissatisfied and forever striving', and describes himself as a sinner useless for the task of freeing his country (Act I, Scene 2).

*Kichak-vadh* (1907) is Khadilkar's overt political allegory based on a *Mahabharat* episode.[12] While living incognito at the court of Virat, the Pandavs encounter his powerful brother-in-law Kichak who covets Draupadi-as-Sairandhri. The liberal response comes from Yudhishthir-as-Kankabhat who advises patience and pleas to the royal women, while Bhim-as-Ballabh supports a violent confrontation. Finally, Bhim kills Kichak with Yudhishthir's consent.

In the immediately recognisable allusion to the 1905 partition of Bengal, Sairandhri becomes Mother India (or Wife India) whose ravishment is attempted by the autocratic Kichak-like Curzon who

[11] Khadilkar, *Kanchangadchi Mohana.*

[12] Khadilkar, *Kichak-vadh.*

has appropriated political power from the remote and thus ineffectual British Parliament. Kankabhat represents the Moderates who abhor violence as tactically inadvisable and recommend persuasion, while Ballabh or the Extremist faction insists on militant resistance. The dialogue effectively underscores the parallel: Kankabhat's response to the once-powerful Pandavs now shedding tears over their past glory is that 'The wise course is to endure with equanimity all honour and humiliation until God grants us the occasion to openly display our power'. To this Sairandhri replies:

> Maharaj, you are the repository of the philosophy of peace. It is natural for you to believe that everybody should submit peacefully to the oppressors' kicks. Besides, after the end of our forest-exile, in our present state of living incognito, you are unable to gauge the unhappiness of others. You yourself are able to attend the royal court, the king consults you only in discussions pertaining to religion and religious duty, throws at you a few coins for your game of dice, and you are content with that. Then you – the rightful claimant to the throne of Indraprastha – advise even your own wife to submit as a dasi to the immoral desires of a stranger. Can anything be more shameful for the Pandavs? You ought to at least conduct yourself in a manner that prevents future generations from pointing at the Pandavs' behaviour in Virat-nagari as exemplifying how one begins to enjoy slavery after a while. This is the only request this abject wife of yours has to submit at your feet (Act I, Scene 3).

The ineffectual Kankabhat's final advice to Virat on the duties of a just king is to protect the weak:

> That is why I humbly submit, Maharaj, that it is the king's sacred duty to ensure that even a dasi is not tempted to betray her paativratya. No matter how quietly the subjects endure oppression, the ruler will not escape punishment in the final judgement of God (Act IV, Scene 3).

The immediate and enormous impact of *Kichak-vadh* was reported by a correspondent in *The Times of India* (10 February 1910):

> It is well-known that in no part of India, not even in Bengal, is hostility to British rule more widespread or bitter than in the Deccan ... A most pernicious influence has been exerted by a play acted all over the Deccan, as well as in Bombay city, to crowded houses. The author, Mr Khadilkar, was formerly the sub-editor and is now the editor of Mr Tilak's paper, the 'Kesari'. He has written several plays and in all of them may be found

> sneers at and depreciation of British rule, but in . . . 'The Killing of Kichaka,' he has surpassed himself.[13]

The correspondent then captures the fierce audience reaction and the seeming official helplessness:

> It may be said that all this is mere fooling. But no Englishman who has seen the play acted would agree. All his life he will remember the tense, scowling faces of the men as they watch Kichaka's outrageous acts, the glistening eyes of the Brahmin ladies as they listen to Draupadi's entreaties, their scorn of Yudhisthira's tameness, their admiration of Bhima's passionate protests, and the deep hum of satisfaction which approves his slaughter of the tyrant. It will be asked why the authorities do not interfere. The answer is that they have not the power to deal with the poison effectively. A prosecution in the ordinary Courts would fail. To stop the play by the police would only multiply thousand-fold the sale of the printed version. The law does not permit the summary prohibition of the sale of any book . . . And thus it is that there goes unchecked the production of a play abounding in every form of incitement to an emotional audience.[14]

He found this proof enough that the play's political message was responsible for an attempt 'to assassinate Kichaka's successor, Lord Minto' and the actual murder of Jackson at Nashik in 1909. The obvious conclusion was that the freedom of expression to which the British were entitled was dangerous if offered to Indians: 'a theory evolved in the West may not fit in with the facts of the East, and it is more important to protect the lives of the officials than to give unfettered licence to Extremist publicists'.[15]

The police machinery was already active and the play was banned in early 1910 under the Dramatic Performances Act 1876 (XIX of 1876), requiring all the District Magistrates in the Bombay Presidency and all Political Agents at Princely States to enforce it.[16] The ban was lifted in 1926.

The final and far milder political intervention by Khadilkar was an indirect case for Indian political representation under nominal

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[13] Cited in Kulkarni, *Natakakar Khadilkar*, p. 221.
[14] *Ibid.*, p. 224.
[15] *Ibid.*
[16] *Ibid.*, pp. 215, 220.

British imperial rule in *Bhaubandaki* (1909).[17] When the plan to invest infant Sawai Madhavrao as the new Peshwa is finalised, with political power to be exercised by the *barbhai* (a group of administrators and statesmen), their chief says:

> The Chhatrapatis rose when the Badshah's power was on the wane; when the Chhatrapatis lost their lustre, the Peshwas began to shine; now the Peshwas have destroyed one another. Therefore the time has come to initiate the administration of the barbhai, instead of concentrating power in one dynasty. The royal throne should belong to one dynasty and administration should be carried out by all the people – by the barbhai. This is the point our swaraj has reached, I think. Who can stem this tremendous tide of Time when it runs its own course? (Act III, Scene 2).

The ban on *Kichak-vadh* had the expected deterrent effect. Affected by the general political milieu, Gadkari supposedly withdrew his first play *Garva-nirvan* (Pride and Its Fall) written before *Prem-sannyas*. Varerkar's *Sonyacha Kalas* (Golden Spire, 1931), about labour strife, was subjected to close pre-performance scrutiny: the concluding discussion about the need for 'non-violence' was strongly objected to because of its association with Gandhi; a translation by the Oriental Translator had to be sent to the Home Department for approval and was passed after minor cuts.[18]

## Femininity Discourse

*Assertion of Patriarchal Norms and Prejudices*

Consciously or unconsciously, most playwrights cast their ideal woman in the patriarchal mould predicated on the norms of paativratya, beauty, willing subordination to male authority, maternal instinct and controlled sexuality – sometimes adding bravery and courage as well.

### Wifely Devotion or Paativratya

It was possibly a coincidence – but a telling one – that Kirtane's pioneering play, *Thorle Madhavrao Peshwe* (1861), ended in the protagonist's death leading to his wife Ramabai's self-immolation as a sati –

[17] Khadilkar, *Bhaubandaki*.
[18] *Ibid.*, pp. 553–55.

an event further 'glorified' by the Ichalkaranjikar Natak Mandali's canny exploitation of the pious and credulous mindset of contemporary women and men, as described earlier. The dramatist could not have imagined his inauguration of a new genre as a historical setting for a participatory spectacle.

Peshwa Ramabai has been constructed by Maharashtra's collective mind as the icon of womanhood, primarily because of her sati; and the scene's dramatic climax was heightened because the custom still lingered in public memory. Now, a century and a half later, it seems significant – if not ominous – that the very first realistic depiction of a woman on stage should be as a sati – the ultimate pativrata, the wife whose total submersion of her personality into her husband's leaves her no life apart from, or after the end of, his.

The most effective foil to this historical 'ideal woman' is Peshwa Anandibai, unfailingly depicted as a ruthless murderess fired by vicarious ambition for her husband (without even the benefit of just punishment and possible redemption, like Lady Macbeth's mental derangement after 'the deed is done'). Whether Raghoba is complicit in her tampering with the official order to authorise Narayanrao's murder (as in Khadilkar's *Bhaubandaki*) or whether she is the sole culprit (as in V.S. Chhatrye's *Narayanrao Peshwe Yanche Natak* of 1870), is hardly relevant to the stereotype. But significantly Anandibai's devotion to her husband is not in doubt. The ideal woman and her antithesis (in terms of nobility of character) are both pativratas.[19]

The trope of paativratya is occasionally highlighted through contrast, as in Khadilkar's *Kichak-vadh*. Sairandhri/Draupadi is placed against Saudamini, the lowly dasi who is always on the lookout for handsome men and harbours the ambition to attract Kichak's attention. Sairandhri makes impassioned pleas to Virat's queen and to Kichak's wife to protect her honour:

> Both of you are great, saintly pativratas. Very few women in this world understand, as you do, that women prefer death to the violation of their paatrivratya. That is why I abjectly appeal to you not to forget that you are ordering another pativrata – and not a mere dasi – to serve as a courtesan (Act II, Scene 2).

[19] Incidentally Anandibai also served as a deterrent example of an educated woman in the public discourse because of her ability to read and change the wording of the order.

That paativratya is here depicted as the cherished monopoly of high-status women and not of 'mere dasis' is a caste-/class-based prejudice we can overlook for the moment.

Chaste wives are required additionally to control their wayward husbands, as Khadilkar repeatedly reminds us. Kankabhat says, 'If women do not restrain the licentiousness of men, one would have to say that Brahmadev has failed in his stratagem of creating women alongside men in order to control them' (Act II, Scene 2). Khadilkar reiterates this in *Draupadi* (1920). After she has been staked in a game of dice and lost to the Kauravs, Draupadi says to Dharmaraj:

> What right did you have to stake your wife when you had become a dasa yourself? . . . Men may go astray if they wish, but they should never lead their women astray first; because women have the ability to uplift men who have fallen (Act III, Scene 2).

Before a woman can become a pativrata, she also has to be a devoted daughter, dedicated to her natal family's welfare – as is Rukmini in Khadilkar's *Svayamvar*. Only a daughter who guards the honour of her family can make a suitable bride. However, after marriage, the same woman must forget her parental family and devote herself entirely to her husband and his family – like Sindhu in Gadkari's *Ekach Pyala*, the ultimate pativrata of Marathi drama. Reduced to penury and menial work by her drunkard husband, this rich man's daughter blames her fate but never her husband, even for the starvation of her infant son – and refuses help from her brother.

On one level Gadkari – through Ramlal – decries oppressive male power in society: 'We exercise over the weak the limited power that Fate grants us, with the arrogance of a sultan' (Act V, Scene 3). The reason is that male minds have become insensitive, 'crushed under the weight of dead customs for thousands of years'. But insensitive husbands are still exonerated, because their authority is legitimate, and therefore not to be perceived as oppressive.

An oft-mentioned scene from the play is the one where Sudhakar, in a drunken fit and instigated by Taliram, orders the latter to break off the mangalsutra around Sindhu's neck (to sell it for his liquor). Sindhu's father and brother Padmakar enter at that moment. But when Padmakar wants her to leave 'this hell' at once, she protests that 'a place which contains "his" feet cannot be hell' – for her it is heaven,

and the only one (Act III, Scene 4.) Sindhu then bursts into one of the most popular songs in the play: 'How can I leave these feet?' In a sober moment Sudhakar bestows on Sindhu the highest encomium: 'So holy is your status that the five pativratas [of mythology – Ahilya, Draupadi, Sita, Tara, and Mandodari] should ever worship you to obtain spiritual merit' (Act IV, Scene 2).

Sindhu's self-sacrifice at the altar of paativratya forms the climax of the play. Sudhakar has just hit and killed their infant son and also hit Sindhu hard on the head making her fall down in a faint. Her brother Padmakar has brought a police constable who hesitates to arrest Sudhakar, just as Ramlal hesitates to blame him, so uncontested is a husband–father's authority over his family. When Sindhu regains consciousness and sees her brother, her first reaction is to ask him to give Sudhakar the little rice that she has saved for him, because he has not eaten for two days. When Padmakar urges the unwilling constable to interrogate Sindhu about Sudhakar's violence, she refuses pointblank to acknowledge his guilt, claiming unconvincingly that starvation had led her to faint – and to fall on top of her baby, crushing him and hurting herself. The constable cannot take action: 'No matter how sharp the weapon of justice, it is powerless against the shield of the spiritual merit of such a holy pativrata!' (Act V, Scene 4). Ramlal is ever ready to extol a devoted wife:

> Blessed are you, Sindhutai! It is Aryan women like you who justify this sacred land's name – Aryavarta! Bharatavarsha is the real natal home of saintly women and satis. The government has made a law to stop our saintly women from immolating their bodies along with their dead husbands'; but these goddesses offer themselves in self-sacrifice for their husbands by burning inwardly while still alive (Act V, Scene 4).

Sindhu's last wish is to die with her head in Sudhakar's lap; her last words voice concern for his well-being. He in turn drinks poison with his last drink (after declaiming the evils of drink) and dies with his head on Sindhu's feet: 'Only if I accompany this goddess, holding firmly on to her feet, will my sin be eradicated by her spiritual merit; then alone will I be able to enter the portals of heaven!' (Act V, Scene 4). This evokes Indianised shades of Shakespeare for whom Gadkari expressed great deference. Desdemona, strangled by Othello, answers horrified Emilia's query about the culprit's identity: 'Nobody, I myself', and adds: 'Commend me to my kind lord!' Overcome by remorse, Othello kills himself and dies 'upon a kiss'.

Gadkari's Sindhu has long cast a strong spell over the male psyche, as a sublime emblem of traditional Indian womanhood viewing self-sacrifice as empowerment. In fact all of Gadkari's plays have paativratya as a theme and P.K. Atre attributes a large part of Gadkari's success as a dramatist to his conservative mindset which resonated with his contemporary society.[20]

### Beauty

Outward beauty as a reflection of inner beauty is an unwritten but strictly enforced requirement. The loveliness of the major women characters thus transcends an aesthetic value and indicates moral beauty; the corollary makes ugliness proof of moral depravity and cruelty, inviting callous ridicule.[21]

Khadilkar set the tradition, displaying shockingly poor taste in a man of otherwise lofty ideas. An elderly Brahmin priest in *Kichak-vadh* says to the dasi Saudamini (who expresses a wish to seduce the all-powerful Kichak):

> Your body – made of bones and rotten blood – might appear to people as if it has been covered by a thick and rough hide. But a noble person like Kichak Maharaj must be made to think that you are the very image of a celestial beauty, inside and out … Your lustreless, pale face might appear to the world like that of a consumptive, but in the next world it will appear like the moon. Dishonest people might say that your mouth drools with dirty saliva, but I will prove to Kichak Maharaj that the touch of a lover's lips will turn this saliva to nectar … The scales on your eyes make them appear to be shut at all times, as loose-tongued young men might complain; but discerning men consider your eyes to be the closed quiver of Cupid's arrows (Act II, Scene 1).

Gadkari hones the formula further. The forgetful Gokul in *Prem-sannyas* serves to provide comic relief also through his disparagement of his wife whom he views as both shrewish and ugly. 'Her masculine figure, deep voice, muscular limbs and glossy dark skin' remind him of demonesses of mythology. Instead of possessing the voice of a cuckoo and the skin of a female cobra, she has the pitch black skin of a cuckoo and the hissing of a cobra; instead of the slow gait of an

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[20] Atre, 'Pradirgha Prastavana', pp. 1–159.

[21] In an extension of this view, modern Hindi cinema sometimes portrays villains as misshapen.

elephant and the large eyes of a deer, she has the small eyes (and also tusks) of an elephant and the restless gait of a deer. Her cheekbones are so high and her face so flat as to make her nose and chin hardly visible. Gokul waxes eloquent in this vein for a few pages (Act II, Scene 4).

Literary critics have striven to explain away this offensive variety of humour by attributing it to the economic compulsion to cater to audience tastes.[22] The question arises whether he satisfied the existing craving for such humour, or helped to create and perpetuate it.

Gadkari undoubtedly created an indelible stereotype of ugly women as ridiculous: he sharpened its contours and filled it with vivid colours. The classic example – again surprisingly callous in a man of his brilliance – is the pair of Indu and Bindu in *Bhav-bandhan*.[23] Kamanna, pretending to be blind, says to Indu:

> And suppose you are very ugly; your skin is pitch black; your gaze is cross-eyed; your neck is set at an angle; your face is liberally pock-marked; your eyes are bulging because Brahmadev first set them in properly, then removed them and placed them lightly on the surface; your chin seems to have its tapering end chopped off; your arms and legs appear lifeless, as if they have been fixed to the torso with nails (Act II, Scene 3).

Again Kamanna says in an aside when confronted by both Indu and Bindu:

> It seems the Creator first practised making hideous women [of mythology] . . . and then made these two expertly as finished products! A person is half-dead the moment he sets eyes on either! It's not difficult to tell why their parents died so early! . . . O God, had you not acquired the knowledge of doing away with infants when these two black brats were little? (Act III, Scene 2).[24]

The requirement of good looks applies to men also: witness the words of a song by Rukmini to describe Krishna in Khadilkar's *Svayamvar*: 'Verily he is a handsome man-lion'.[25] But the instance of

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[22] For example, Kale, 'Natya-vangmaya', pp. 113–14.

[23] Gadkari, *[Sangit] Bhav-bandhan*, pp. 465–620.

[24] The last comment sounds even more horrifying today with rampant female foeticide and infanticide, and a generally skewed sex ratio because of a female deficit in the Indian population.

[25] Khadilkar, *Sangit Svayamvar*, Act II, Scene 1.

an ugly man being ridiculed is rare, and then again only in a marginal role, like that of Krishna's friend Vidushak in *Saubhadra* (Act II, Scene 1). Deval's aged Bhujanganath who yearns to marry young Sharada is ridiculed by her friends; this derogation is more ageist than sexist (and perhaps condonable, not because ageism is acceptable, but only because of his villainy in the diegesis of the play).[26]

### Willing Subordination to Male Authority

Inherent in women's goodness is their spontaneous subordination to and respect for men, as required by the entrenched gender asymmetry. In Khadilkar's *Bayakanche Banda*, the women of the female kingdom – including the queen – address the male intruders in the second person singular (*tu*); but the moment they fall in love and agree to marry, they switch over to a highly honorific plural (*apan*, not even the usual honorific plural *tumhi*) and begin to address the same men as 'Maharaj' or 'sir'.[27] The men, concomitantly, change from a respectful mode of address to the usual singular. Thus the gender balance shifts even as the playwright insists – through his male mouthpieces – that the marriages concerned would be based on equality and would involve no subordination.

Flouting male authority or criticising men instantly incurred for a woman the charge of being shrewish. Gadkari's Gokul in *Prem-sannyas* characterises his wife thus only because she justifiably complains about him and serves as a prototype for many others right up to Atre's Gargi in *Lagnachi Bedi*; taming these 'shrews' forms part of the happy ending.

### Maternal Instinct and Controlled Sexuality

In Atre's famous words in his preface to *Gharabaher*, 'a woman is a wife for a moment but a mother for eternity'. The play shows Nirmala returning to her effete husband only for the sake of their son, accepting the 'willing slavery' imposed by love.[28]

But this does not preclude pre-marital romance and secret desire. What makes a woman really attractive to the patriarchal mind is the combination of the simultaneous and contradictory conflation of chaste thoughts and actions with well-concealed and controlled

[26] Deval, *Sangit Sharada Natak*.
[27] Khadilkar, *Sangit Bayakanche Banda*.
[28] Atre, *Gharabaher*.

sexuality. In Khadilkar's musical plays, romantic and light erotic touches added titillation to the escapist entertainment. Bhamini in *Manapaman* confides to her friend an extended daydream in which Dhairyadhar asked her to change her green silk sari for a black one – only to comment later that the sari looked better while she was in the process of draping it (Act III, Scene 3).[29] Bhamini then adds, pouting with pretended annoyance, 'I don't like this kind of teasing!' Her desire is legitimate because it is directed solely toward the man she is going to marry.

The same legitimacy protects Khadilkar's famous romantic and semi-erotic monologue in *Svayamvar* when Rukmini addresses the absent Krishna in a soliloquy expressing her desire to be just like a milk-maid who fetches water from the river. But she admonishes him not to throw a pebble at the clay water-pot on her head and then gaze mischievously at her drenched body. The famous line, 'If you must fling a stone . . .' and the accompanying gesture have been immortalised by Bal Gandharva, as mentioned earlier (cover photo). The line is followed by her pulling rank – she is after all a princess.

Predictably, while Khadilkar's high-born women like Rukmini and Bhamini project controlled sexuality, expressed only in soliloquies or in conversation with their confidantes, women of an inferior status, like dasis (as for example Saudamini in *Kichak-vadh*) express their desires rather crudely.

In the interstices of Khadilkar's plays is tucked away the projection of prevalent prejudice about women as shallow, easily swayed by wealth to the exclusion of meaningful personal traits. This view is ably articulated by Lakshmidhar in *Manapaman* who is confident of winning any woman on the strength of his ornaments.

### Bravery and Courage

For all this submissiveness (towards the men in the family), women were also required to be brave and patriotic. Politically militant historical plays were usually peopled by female warriors: Vir Joshi's Tejaswini in *Rana-dundubhi*, Savarkar's Sulochana in *Sannyasta Khadga* and Madwoman's daughter in *Uttar-kriya*, Khare-shastri's Padmavati in *Ugra-mangal*, and even Girijabai Kelkar's Rajkunwar. Sometimes these women entered the battlefield in male disguise. The point

[29] Khadilkar, *Sangit Manapaman.*

seems to be that women possess the same kind and degree of courage, bravery, loyalty, and patriotism as do men. But this equality is more apparent than real: the qualities of bravery are masculine and thus regarded as superior; women are elevated by possessing them. The same women, however, are also required to be tender, sensitive, and maternal to prove their feminine credentials, thus striving for a balance in their androgenous attributes.

By way of an interesting digression it may be noted that none of these brave women of the stage (or cinema) even remotely approximated the unique image of an all-powerful woman created by 'Fearless Nadia' in Mumbai's Hindi cinema or Bollywood of the 1930s and 40s.[30] Nadia, born Mary Evans of a British soldier stationed in Australia and a Greek dancer, spent all her life in India and married the Parsi film director Homi Wadia. In a series of films, the slightly plump, white skinned, blonde, and blue-eyed actress undertook wild adventures, wielding guns and whips, protecting the innocent (sometimes even saving the hero) and punishing the guilty – all for a good social cause. Tremendously popular and accepted by her legion of fans as authentically Indian, Nadia remained unique and no attempt was ever made to revive a similar image either on screen or stage.

But apart from physical bravery, there is another kind of courage that women are required, or assumed, to possess – the courage to endure suffering. This is underscored most emphatically and consistently by Atre. In the transitional society of his *Udyacha Sansar*, for example, where the old mores have been erased and new ones not yet established; family men like Vishram have lost a sense of duty and fairness in their excessive individualism and self-centredness.[31] Simultaneously the problem of educated, unmarried young women like Shaila has assumed dire proportions – leading to a great deal of general moral anxiety. Responsible for causing suffering to the women in the play are two men – Vishram and Ulhas; those worst affected are women – Karuna, Shaila, and Nayana. But these women have, unlike the men, the strength to struggle and overcome their sorrow and their problems. As Shekhar collapses under the revelation that Nayana is his half-sister and thus beyond his romantic reach, she says to him: 'You are a man, but you haven't yet grasped the nature

[30] Dorothee Wenner, *Fearless Nadia: The True Story of Bollywood's Original Stunt Queen* (trans. Rebecca Morrison), New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2005.

[31] Atre, *Udyacha Sansar.*

of male weakness. Men will never acquire the strength to combat suffering' (Act II).

*Patriarchy and the Gender Equality Debate*

The rare dramatist who squarely confronted patriarchy was Atre, though without challenging it. He describes its effect on women in heart-rending terms, but hardly ever suggests a solution. His 'happy patriarchal marriage' in *Gharabaher* is a palpable illusion. In *Udyacha Sansar* he has abandoned the attempt to even ameliorate gender asymmetry in marriage, being content to only describe it. As Karuna says to her daughter (in Act II):

> I am weeping not for myself, nor for you, but for all women. Shaila, womanhood is itself a dire calamity. There is no other misfortune like being born a woman. Nature has been unjust while apportioning joys and sorrows in life – it has given to men the irresponsibility that accompanies happiness and heaped upon women the responsibility for carrying a mountain of unhappiness. That's why I am weeping. Women are born to weep, you know! It seems God has given them eyes only in order to weep!

At the same time, Karuna insists (Act III) that 'Women's capacity to endure is not their weakness. It requires tremendous strength to endure suffering'.

Atre's most unflinching indictment of man's inhumanity to woman – by far the strongest if not the only such in Marathi drama of the period – comes at the end of the same play (Act III) when Karuna confronts Vishram with his prolonged harassment of her over two decades, in her last outburst:

> Man is a creature, but not an animal! And in a way the males among animals are superior to the animals among males – like yourself! Is a wife her husband's slave who gives birth to his children? A cook every morning and evening, a maidservant in-between, and a bedfellow at night – is this your idea of a wife? Nature has endowed women with a certain weakness which you have exacerbated with your laws, customs, morality, and religion, thereby rendering them totally helpless. All the institutions in your society have been founded on women's weakness! Marriage is a knot tied for life – for life or for death? Men have constructed this iron cage of marriage to incarcerate a woman for life, after arranging loopholes for themselves. Thousands of women must have died, banging their heads against the bars of this cage. This cage which gives men complete licence

> and imprisons women for life must be broken, shattered, and thrown away. Then alone will the women in the family of tomorrow receive respect! But I do not possess that strength any longer. I am tired, exhausted, and have no energy.

Karuna is finally defeated, but only after two decades of suffering at her husband's hands, trying to hold the family together and shelter her children.

But even Atre does not promote the concept of gender equality. Other male dramatists treat the concept – or rather the very idea of women's equality and independence – as a hilarious subject of comedy, as in Khadilkar's *Bayakanche Banda.* That the play is intended to be farcical is obvious at the outset from the intentionally shallow and meaningless nature of the women's protest against patriarchal subordination and from the repeated and childish use of the phrase 'these wretched men'. It is rumoured that this phrase itself was a source of great humour. The idea that women are reduced to a subordinate position in marriage is held up as a joke, the romantic wooing of the women by the men who claim to be 'enslaved' by their charms is presented as a pretended reversal of the real gender imbalance, and the idea of creating a men's quarter or 'mardana' as a counterfoil to the prevalent zenanas is rendered hilarious.

Girijabai Kelkar's *Purushanche Banda* (1912) contests this only superficially, suggesting that an all-male society would be unviable. Her attempt is to show women as men's equals in intellect, education, and skills, and superior in compassion. But she does not question male superiority in the family or society. Her Kumudini's first priority is obedience to her father and looking after him (to the extent of sacrificing her studies), and the queen does not dream of flouting the king's diktat or even try to dissuade him from a patently silly decision. Girijabai's Rajkunwar does try, successfully, to bring her errant husband on the right path; but she does so as a pativrata and a loyal Maratha subject.

The idea of gender equality eluded Marathi drama – unsurprisingly, considering its general absence in literature and society. It made a brief appearance only in Kashibai Kanitkar's novel *Palakhicha Gonda* (The Palanquin Tassel, partially serialised since 1913, and finally published as a book in 1928), which shows a young woman entrusted with the task of administering a small princely state (because of her marriage to the mentally challenged and thus incapacitated

prince).[32] She introduces women's education and employment (following the liberal agenda of J.S. Mill) and transforms her state into a utopian society of gender equality. But the idea did not take root in Marathi fiction and was not even faintly glimpsed in drama.

For all the valorisation of Ibsen, Marathi drama failed to explicitly engage with the nature of pariarchy and was able to produce only Nora's timid sisters, such as Bhanumati in Rangnekar's *Kulavadhu*.

[32] Kashibai Kanitkar, *Palakhicha Gonda* in Meera Kosambi (trans. and ed.), *Feminist Vision or 'Treason against Men'?: Kashibai Kanitkar and the Engendering of Marathi Literature*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2008, pp. 235–334. Significantly, Kashibai's 'equal' women are either pativratas (like the princess protagonist) or happily unmarried (like her narrator–sister).

# PART TWO: CINEMA

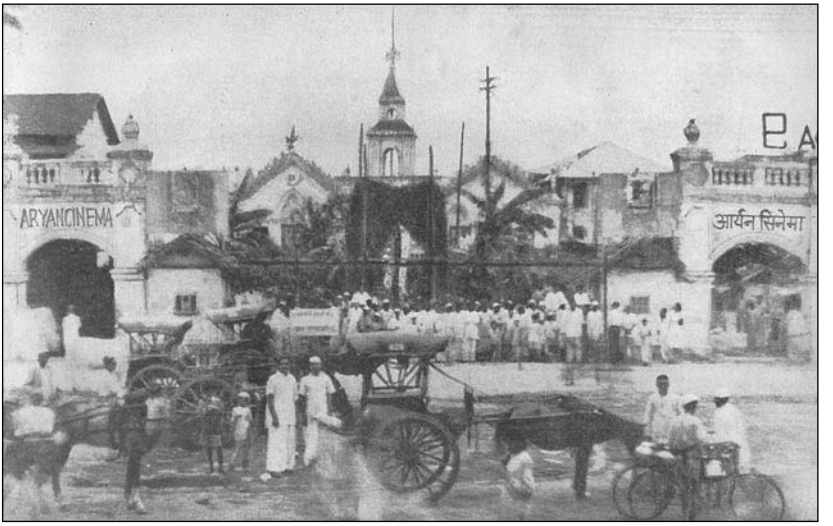


**Plate 13.1:** Aryan Cinema, Pune (built in 1915).

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# Section V
# Motion Pictures

**Plate 13.2:** D.G. Phalke readying his son for the shooting of his pioneering film *Raja Harishchandra*, 1913.

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# 13

# Silent Films and Talkies

That 2013 was the centenary year of Phalke's first film *Raja Harishchandra* – in fact India's first feature film – prompts a look back in curiosity to assess its impact in moulding social history. Cinema's radicalisation of entertainment and culture especially from the era of the talkies since 1932 compelled theatre to yield ground after nine decades of hegemony. The paradigm shift involved complex and far-reaching changes and impacted upon more than the manner in which audiences spent their leisure hours. But cinema's startling novelty and the conspicuous media rupture concealed the various subterranean continuities – of themes, individuals, and even the method of visualising scenes. It took years for cinema to free itself from the partially static presentation of staged scenes and dialogue, and to explore and deploy the technical potential of the camera as more than merely a richer variation of the spectator's ordinary gaze or as an instrument of magic effects. The only initial differences were a wide choice of locales for outdoor scenes, a vast scale of enormous indoor sets, and the occasional trick scene. The increasing sophistication of technique came also with improved equipment. But this was preceded by the truly amazing extent of initial innovation leading to the fashioning of rudimentary film cameras to compensate for the unavailability of money and access to foreign equipment, coupled with the imaginative experimentation with the expensive and thus meagre supply of raw film. The complete dedication and determination of the pioneers of a century ago to overcome obstacles seems unbelievable to us today.

Equally impressive is the alacrity with which Maharashtra responded to international developments in film technology and Indianised this new medium of Western origin through style and

content.[1] The Lumiere brothers screened their first set of 12 short films at Mumbai's Watson Hotel on 7 July 1896 for an audience of 200, at two-rupee tickets. A week later the films were screened twice a day at Novelty (later named Excelsior) Theatre with tickets ranging from two annas to two rupees. Within a year, the camera shop owner H.S. Bhatawadekar (alias Dada Sawe or Saway) ordered a cine-camera from London – the first such to be imported into India. He filmed a specially arranged wrestling bout, had it processed in England, and exhibited it first on open grounds in Mumbai at night, then at the houses of wealthy residents, and finally at Perry Theatre, charging three and a half rupees per ticket. This was the first publicly exhibited motion picture in India. He also filmed the grand welcome given to R.P. Paranjpye on his return from Cambridge as a Senior Wrangler in 1901 – as the first Indian documentary.

Other foreign films followed and an enterprising Parsi, M. Sethna, constructed Mumbai's first theatre for films in 1904. Most popular among the foreign films was *The Life of Christ* in two parts. The following year Bhatawadekar filmed Lord Curzon's durbar, and planned a film on the life of Krishna in collaboration with his brother. But on the unexpected death of this brother, he scrapped the project and sold his camera cheaply. The trio that bought it – Karandikar, Patankar, and Divekar – deployed it for filming the Imperial Durbar of 1911 and the funeral of Tilak in 1920. Meanwhile in 1912 they had made a 1,000-foot long mythological film *Savitri* which, however, could not be screened due to technical faults. (The film had a young woman in the lead role, and Divekar in an important role.) In 1915 they made a historical film featuring the death of Peshwa Narayanrao, but no details are available.

In 1912 R.G., alias Dadasaheb, Torne (or Tornay) filmed the stage performance of the musical play *Pundalik* in Mumbai and the 8,000-foot long film, released at Coronation Theatre, ran for two weeks at

[1] This entire overview of Marathi cinema is derived largely from Isak Mujawar, *Maharashtra: Birthplace of Indian Film Industry*, New Delhi: Maharashtra Information Centre, Government of Maharashtra, 1969; Watve, *Ek Hoti Prabhat-nagari*; Shantaram, *Shantarama*; and Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999 (1994). For the beginnings of cinema elsewhere in India, see Erick Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1980.

a time when even foreign films ran for three to four days.[2] As the filming of a stage show with a static camera, without using any special technique, it has been denied the status of India's first film – an issue that has recently caused a controversy in Maharashtra.

## D.G. Phalke's Film Companies

The pioneer of the Indian film industry, Dhundiraj Govind (alias Dadasaheb) Phalke (1870–1944), had his first and life-altering encounter with this new medium – which in turn revolutionised the life of his country – inevitably in the cosmopolitan and metropolitan mileu of Mumbai, far from the small town of Trimbakeshwar near Nashik, where he was born in a poor Brahmin family.[3] With the family he moved to Mumbai where he had his schooling and joined the J.J. School of Arts. He continued to study art at Baroda where his older brother lived, and tried his hand at sketching, painting, sculpture and even magic tricks. (Later he was to hold magic shows under the name 'Kelpha' – his name spelt backwards.) When he developed an interest in photography, his teacher helped him buy a camera.

After the death of his wife and three children in 1899 during the plague epidemic, he married Kaveri Karandikar (niece of singer–actor Bhaurao Kolhatkar) in about 1901 – thus forging an unexpected link between theatre and cinema. Renamed Saraswati during the wedding, she was a source of constant support to him. After working as a

[2] There were three successive Coronation Theatres at different locales in Mumbai; personal communication from Rafique Baghdadi, 10 June 2013. I have not attempted the complicated task of tracing the history of cinema halls in Mumbai, Pune or elsewhere; about the 1930s most existing playhouses began to accommodate film projection as well.

[3] This life-sketch is based largely on Sharayu Phalke Summanwar, *The Silent Film*, Pune: India Connect, 2012 and partly on Ashish Rajadhyaksha, 'The Phalke Era: Conflict of Traditional Form and Modern Technology' in Tejaswini Niranjana, P. Sudhir, and Vivek Dhareshwar (eds), *Interrogating Modernity: Culture and Colonialism in India*, Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1993, pp. 47–82. A recent resurgence of interest in Phalke has led to various writings, e.g. Jaya Dadkar, *Dadasaheb Phalke: Kaal ani Kartritva*, Mumbai: Mauj Prakashan Griha, 2010, which seeks to place Phalke's contribution to cinema within an international context. The recent Marathi film, *Harishchandrachi Factory* (directed by Paresh Mokashi, 2010), draws an endearing but modernised portrait of Phalke with obvious artistic licence.

photographer for the Archaeological Survey of India, Phalke worked in Raja Ravi Varma's printing press near Lonavla and in 1909 started his own but short-lived 'Phalke Engraving and Printing Works' there. This was transferred to Mumbai because of the partner who financed it. In 1909 he sailed to Germany to buy printing machinery – and had to undergo a ritual purification ceremony on his return.

His passionate interest in photography was intensified by the film *The Life of Christ* which he saw in Girgaum in Mumbai in 1911 in a tent theatre named 'America India Picture Palace'. During a second viewing his mind's eye nationalistically visualised the life of Krishna on screen; this became his dream project. He saw every film show in town. Impelled by the need for requisite equipment and technical knowledge, he ventured forth to England for two months in 1912, after corresponding with British experts who had promised help. With the camera and other equipment he brought back, he soon launched Phalke Film Company and experimented with short films.

In 1913 came his path-breaking mythological *Raja Harishchandra.* The process involved unforeseen difficulties, starting with a search for actors. After a great deal of talent scouting, Dattatraya Dabke was identified for the role of Harishchandra, but the moral ambiguity and suspicion surrounding the new medium deterred stri-parties, in surprising contrast to their large numbers in theatre. Finally the youngster Anna Salunke reluctantly shaved off his newly sprouted moustache for the role of Taramati. The paucity of suitable actors was redressed by making Phalke's own son Bhalchandra play prince Rohidas (Plate 13.2). The venture was funded by selling Saraswati's ornaments. The film was shot partly at Phalke's house in Mumbai, with some outdoor scenes shot at Trimbakeshwar. Plate 13.2 shows Phalke – clad in what some regarded as the fashionable male dress of dhotar, shirt and necktie (to which was added a jacket when going out) – putting finishing touches to his son's costume, and also reveals the rudimentary condition of his studio with a crowded space combining the make-up room with storage for costume and props. (In contrast, eye-witness accounts describe Pune's Prabhat Studio built in 1933–1934 as palatial.)

The film set a record by running for 23 days at Mumbai's Coronation Theatre; by popular demand it was screened again at Alexandra Theatre in June 1913 where it ran to packed houses again. It made an impact elsewhere in Maharashtra, and even outside, for example in Surat in Gujarat. Newspapers like the *Bombay Chronicle*

gave it rave reviews. A friend of Phalke's, Gangadhar Pathak, opened the Aryan Theatre in Pune in May 1915 with *Raja Harishchandra* (Plate 13.1).

Embedded within the disjuncture between theatre and cinema lay continuity. In a sense Phalke's film was an extension of theatre in that all the female roles were played by men. Also there is a stiffness and staginess about *Raja Harishchandra*; but outdoor locations provided novelty and a sense of physical mobility. Also, having finally found his stri-parties Phalke made the most of them, utilising cinema's freedom. An early scene in the film shows the queen and her ladies-in-waiting disporting themselves in a shallow pool of water in the palace surroundings; this paralleled the titillating scene in *Mrichchha-katik* displaying Vasantasena drenched in the rain. Here we have a rather expressionless queen Taramati emerging from the pool along with her equally expressionless (cross-dressed) companions, all adjusting their padars demurely, when Harishchandra beckons to her to impart the shocking news of his loss of kingdom to sage Vishwamitra. Most scenes were shot with a static camera without close-ups or exploring the full technical potential of the new medium: such technical finesse was to come gradually and Phalke later excelled in trick photography which thrilled the audiences. He always shot his films outdoors in natural light. His was largely a one-man venture: he functioned as the cinematographer, director, art director, editor, and make-up man.

A running commentary was provided to explain each scene: possibly the low levels of literacy – and Mumbai's multi-lingual populace – rendered Marathi titles insufficient. Such a commentary was already an established practice with English films. For example, V. Shantaram's older brother had a job in a cinema hall in Hubli (in Karnataka) about 1915, which involved operating the generator, playing the piano for background music, and loudly explaining the English titles in imported silent films.[4] The writer P.L. Deshpande recounts that a harmonium and tabla were played throughout silent films in his childhood; the instruments were located in front of the screen (but not blocking the action); during fight scenes they were played much more noisily and punctuated by appropriate shouts.[5]

From Mumbai Phalke moved back to Nashik in 1913 and created his studio in his house. The following year *Mohini Bhasmasur* was made

[4] Shantaram, *Shantarama*, p. 37.

[5] Deshpande, 'Ek Hoti Prabhat-nagari', p. 1.

with actresses in the cast – Durgabai Kamat as Parvati and her young 13-year-old daughter Kamala (later Kamalabai Gokhale) in the lead role of Mohini, a celestial dancer. In her guise Vishnu kills the demon Bhasmasur who has earlier won a boon from Shiva enabling him to burn anything or anyone to ashes. The climax involves a dance in which Bhasmasur joins Mohini, following her lead and imitating her movements; she gets him to place his hand on his own head and thus destroy himself. The film provided scope for Phalke's desire for magic effects. It was made in Nashik and the mother–daughter duo was available because their theatre company was temporarily closed. The film was released on 1 January 1914 at Coronation Cinema and Phalke took the entire cast to Mumbai to see it; unfortunately nothing of the film survives today. During the making of the film, the cast helped with technical matters and his wife washed the film (which made her the first female laboratory assistant in Indian film history[6]). Incidentally V.S. Desai recalls his childhood viewing of *Mohini Bhasmasur* at Indore when Phalke himself appeared in front of the screen, after the film ended, to thank the audience.[7]

Other mythologicals, like *Satyavan-Savitri*, followed; Phalke also essayed a documentary on the Ellora caves and several short films which were screened as a side attraction. The films were exhibited in large cities and town where cinema halls had started to appear; in smaller places Phalke screened them with his own projector with which he travelled about, like an itinerant theatre company.[8] Showing films in tents was common practice in small towns, and even in cities like Mumbai which had open grounds like the Esplanade.

During a second trip to England in 1914, Phalke privately screened the subtitled prints of his two mythologicals; this brought him not only acclaim but also offers of partnership which he refused. A proposal from Warner Brothers to exhibit his films in Europe and America was thwarted by the eruption of the World War and disruption of the import of raw films which prevented the making of additional prints.

By this time Phalke was in financial trouble again and Saraswati had to sell her ornaments a second time. Then followed Phalke's fourth

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[6] This point was suggested by Mr Anil Zankar during a discussion in December 2013.

[7] Desai, *Makhamalicha Padada*, pp. 3–4.

[8] Shantaram, *Shantarama*, p. 40.

feature film, the mythological *Lanka-dahan* (The Burning of Lanka, 1917), portraying the climactic event in the Ram–Ravan conflict. The actor Salunke played both Ram and Sita; no scene showed the two characters together. Dabke played Hanuman. Many trick scenes were added. The film drew such crowds at Mumbai's Majestic Cinema that shows were held in quick succession from 7 a.m. to 3 a.m. the next day, with intervals only to let out the spectators and let in a fresh lot. At its release in Pune, Aryan Theatre overflowed with people.

In 1918 Phalke formed a partnership with a wealthy industrialist to establish 'Hindustan Film Company' in Nashik. Its debut film was *Krishna Janma* (The Birth of Krishna) – to parallel *The Birth of Christ* which had so inspired him. Its success was followed by *Kaliya Mardan* (Destruction of the Serpent Kaliya, 1919), which ran for a record 10 months. The story centred on child Krishna who achieves the seemingly impossible feat to free people from a terrible menace. In addition to Phalke's trademark trick scenes, it was distinguished by a reversal of the established theatrical code of gendered cross-dressing: Krishna was played with great aplomb by Phalke's six-year-old daughter Mandakini.

After this film, dissentions developed within the company, the partnership was dissolved, and Phalke went on pilgrimage to Kashi. In 1923 he returned to the industry, directing films for other companies. He is said to have made about 175 short and long films during an eventful career.

Phalke's enormous contribution to film technology spanned innovation and versatility – such as using scenic outdoor locations and ancient ruins around Nashik, as well as touches of trick photography. He specially made short films to showcase the latter: one showed boxes of matchsticks opening automatically and the heaped matchsticks forming various patterns, followed by the boxes (closed again) going off like a train; another had a heap of coins of all denominations arranging themselves to form a decorative carpet. Phalke's striving for realistic effects was not always met with success. For *Gangavataran* (The Advent of River Ganga, 1937) – the only talkie he directed at the invitation of Kolhapur Cinetone – he tried to depict the snowclad Himalayas by painting white a hill near Kolhapur where he was then shooting; unfortunately heavy rain during the night washed off the paint, forcing him to compromise with an artificial indoor set. But Phalke's forte, trick effects, was also in evidence here – in the decapitated head of a man still singing, or the chopped-off head of

a demon flying up and then coming down to settle on his shoulders again. The film was a roaring success.

Phalke made a great deal of money but lost it all because of his idealism and artistic temperament, and spent his last years in abject poverty. V. Shantaram mentions that the ageing Phalke contacted him in Pune; he found him in ill health in a dilapidated dwelling in a crowded part of the city. He helped with a few thousand rupees on Prabhat's behalf to resettle him in a better house in Nashik.[9] This happened in 1938, the silver jubilee year of the film industry, but few other film producers responded to his plea for a contribution.

Unfortunately Phalke's work remained a one-man venture: he did not encourage his staff or publicise their work through proper credits. Nor did he found a tradition.

## Baburao Painter and Maharashtra Film Company

In 1917 a parallel cinema centre emerged at Kolhapur. Maharashtra Film Company was planned jointly by two cousins and partners, Anandrao and Baburao Mistry, who acquired the surname 'Painter' because of their profession of painting: the two cousins also excelled in painting stage backdrops, and this theatre connection proved vital. Anandrao was inspired by Phalke but lacked his opportunities and knowledge. With a group of like-minded friends he took to exhibiting foreign films and later Phalke's films to familiarise himself with the technique of making and projecting films, and after much experimentation he built a film camera out of a projector. Such was the goodwill they had earned in the theatre world that the leading stage actors – Bal Gandharva, Keshavrao Bhosale, and others – promised to donate the proceeds from one performance in every town to contribute funds for his project. But Anandrao died suddenly, when on the verge of making a feature film, and the disheartened Baburao went back to screening films.

Finally, with a great deal of help from various friends, Baburao Painter (1890–1954) founded Maharashtra Film Company in 1918. Working with him were Baburao Pendharkar, the latter's maternal cousin Shantaram Vanakudre, Keshavrao Dhaibar, Saheb Fattehlal, and Vishnupant Damle; capital was provided by Tanibai Kagalkar

[9] Shantaram's correspondence in this regard with the Phalkes is reproduced in Shantaram, *Shantarama*, pp. 212–17.

(a relative of Dhaibar's). The company's first film was the mythological *Sairandhri* (1919), based on the same theme as the banned play *Kichak-vadh*. Painter handled mythological and historical themes in his films (which numbered about 20). But to him also goes the credit for making the first – and for a long time, the sole – Marathi social film, *Savakari Pash* (The Moneylender's Shackles, 1925), about rural indebtedness, starring Shantaram.

The company had a large staff which worked together cohesively without a sense of hierarchy. In 1920 a fire destroyed the studio and the whole team helped its physically laborious reconstruction; work resumed the following year. One of the company's distinctions was its two actresses, Gulab-bai and Anusuyabai (with the screen names of Kamaladevi and Sushiladevi), who made films their career. (Gulab-bai later joined Prabhat Films and was immortalised in its initial signature scene and logo as the woman blowing a long curved horn-like *tutari*.)

Baburao Painter's innovation was his experimentation with indoor shooting in artificial lighting, use of tinted glass as rudimentary filters, and utilising his skill as a painter to create three-dimensional sets for greater realism. He introduced fade-in and fade-out shots. More innovatively he sketched detailed visuals for each shot, complete with costumes which were then made accordingly. (Decades later this method was adopted by Satyajit Ray and came to be known after him.) He was the first to advertise his films through posters and to list all artistes in the credit-titles.

Dissention erupted when Painter brought in an outsider on a high salary to oversee his film production – Moti Gidwani who was trained abroad in film-making (and who later directed the tremendously popular *Khajanchi*). If Gidwani introduced efficiency, his discipline and restrictions vitiated the informal and harmonious atmosphere in which the staff had earlier worked long hours on a low salary. The unrest resulted in a break-up and formation of the Prabhat Film Company by Shantaram, Dhaibar, Damle, and Fattehlal.

Surprisingly, Painter himself left the company in 1930, without demanding the considerable amount that was owed him by the almost insolvent company, and later even helped it out with his own money. He worked intermittently in later years and directed seven talkies, though he was unable to adapt himself to this change from silent films. He tried through a mediator to join Prabhat but was unwilling to work in a subordinate position. That his financial condition

was unstable is suggested by Shantaram who occasionally lent him money on demand, out of respect for his guru.[10] Another offshoot of Maharashtra Film Company was the short-lived Godavari Film Company.

## V. Shantaram and Prabhat Film Company

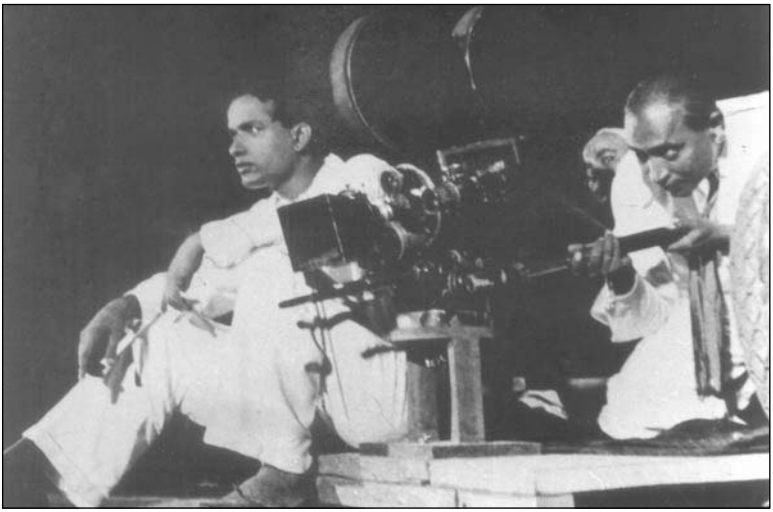

**Plate 13.3:** V. Shantaram (left), c. 1935.

The autobiography which scripts the highly eventful life of Shantaram Vanakudre alias V. Shantaram (1901–1990) is a chronicle of theatre and especially cinema – whose history he made – encompassing the 20th century.[11] Born to a Jain father and a Hindu Maratha mother in a small town near Kolhapur,[12] he was exposed to theatre at an early age through his father who belonged to an amateur group. When the family moved to Kolhapur, he saw many plays with his father who supplemented his meagre income as a shopkeeper by supplying gas

[10] Shantaram, *Shantarama*, p. 170 and other scattered references.

[11] Shantaram, *Shantarama*.

[12] Shantaram is ambiguous about his mother's origins. Leela Chitnis mentions in passing that Shantaram's maternal aunt, Mrs Pendharkar, was born into a devdasi family; Leela Chitnis, *Chanderi Duniyet*, Pune: Shrividya Prakashan, 1990 (1981), p. 111.

lanterns to theatres on rent. He expresses his early distaste, repeatedly reinforced in later years, for cross-dressing on stage. His talent for mimicry came to the attention of Govindrao Tembe who visited Kolhapur in about 1914; he suggested sending the lad to Gandharva Company in Pune. Here he received food, clothing, accommodation and bedding, but no salary for the first six months. His singing lessons met with scant success, but he mastered dancing and gave a good account of himself in group dances on stage after overcoming an initial revulsion for wearing women's clothes. A salary of Rs 3 for the next six months was encouraging, but then he left Pune and returned home.

Kolhapur's old Shivaji Theatre had been renovated as Deccan Cinema to screen short films at a paisa or two per ticket. Here Shantaram learned how to operate the projector. His sporadic schooling ended with a failure to clear matriculation. The family moved to Hubli where he worked as a fitter in the railway workshop at eight annas a day and spent his evenings as an unpaid door-keeper at Deccan Cinema where Phalke's early films and various foreign films were screened. After a year he lost his job as a fitter because of an accident and became an unpaid apprentice to a photographer and signboard painter.

In 1920 a visit by Shantaram's maternal cousin Baburao Pendharkar, manager of Maharashtra Film Company, led him to seek a job with the company in Kolhapur. He helped out in the camera workshop and worked hard as a general handyman – without pay; even his meals were paid for by his cousin. But he became an integral part of the company's 'family' of 15. Soon he got a role as Vishnu and also as Krishna in the film *Surekha-haran* (for which his cousin suggested the screen name 'V. Shantaram'); in his free time he worked in all the departments from film processing to cleaning the floors. Now came the belated reward and he was put on the payroll at Rs 9 a month. But his workload did not change: he played various minor roles in ongoing films and gradually learned complicated tasks like film editing by watching the process closely. The success of *Surekha-haran* made Maharashtra Film Company famous alongside Phalke's Hindustan Film Company at Nashik, Mumbai's Kohinoor Company, and Calcutta's Madan Company.

But a few months later a terrible fire destroyed much of the studio, together with the negatives of feature films and short rare films on Tilak and the actor Ganpatrao Joshi. Fortunately funds were offered

by a new aristocratic partner, an American camera was bought in Mumbai, and work started on the historical film *Sinhagad* – the first historical silent film in India – which won great acclaim at Mumbai's Novelty Cinema. Shantaram played several small roles in the film.

By 1923 Shantaram was nicely ensconced in the company, earned Rs 50 per month, and had made a careful study of all the departments of film-making – especially shooting, editing, direction, make-up, and acting small roles. His first major role came in *Savakari Pash* (The Moneylender's Shackles, 1925), a social film based on a story by N.H. Apte which made cinema history despite its box-office failure. After some more films Baburao Painter began to rest on his laurels and neglected films. Shantaram got an opportunity to direct a historical film with Keshavrao Dhaibar; despite its success the directors received no acknowledgement. Vishnupant Damle and Saheb Fattehlal had a similar experience. Their frustration reached a boiling point when highly paid outsiders were brought in to fill higher positions. After nine years Shantaram left the company in 1928 with these three other assistant directors.

The four partners set up Prabhat Film Company the following year in Kolhapur.[13] Sitarampant Kulkarni who provided the capital was made the fifth partner. Shantaram's maternal cousins Baburao Pendharkar, his younger brother Bhalchandra alias Bhalji Pendharkar and their step-brother 'Master' Vinayak (Karnataki) joined him intermittently and helped him in various capacities. (The Vankudre-Pendharkar-Karnataki clan was to gradually capture a large part of the Marathi cinema empire.)

Prabhat's first film was *Gopal-Krishna* (1929) portraying Krishna's defeat of the oppressive king Kauns as a carefully concealed political allegory of the contestation of an oppressive colonial power. It was followed by *Khuni Khanjir* (1930), *Ranisaheb* or *Bajarbattu* (a children's film, 1930), *Udaya-kal* (a historical story with Shantaram acting as Shivajiraje, 1930), *Chandrasena* (1931), and *Julum* (1931).[14]

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[13] Most of Prabhat's history is based on Watve, *Ek Hoti Prabhat-nagari*; Bapu Watve, *'Prabhat' Chitre*, Pune: A.V. Damle, [1970?]; Shantaram, *Shantarama*; Athavale, *'Prabhat'kal*; and M. Vaidya, *It's Prabhat*, VCD produced by Prabhat Pictures, 2004.

[14] *Udaya-kal* was the new name substituted for the original *Swarajyache Toran* (Heralding Swaraj) which the censor objected to.

Prabhat's transition from silent films to 'talkies' was the first paradigm shift within Marathi cinema, in response to the revolution in the international film industry and its Indian echoes. Hollywood's first partial 'talkie', *Jazz Singer*, was produced in 1927, followed by *Alam Ara* by Mumbai's Imperial Company under the direction of Ardeshir Irani in 1931. When it drew crowds in its eighth week and was shortly joined by Madan Company's *Laila-Majnu* running to packed houses, Shantaram felt compelled to rethink his belief in the ability of good silent films to withstand this challenge.

Thus Prabhat made its first talkie in 1932 entitled *Ayodhyecha Raja* with Durga Khote and Govindrao Tembe in the lead roles. The induction of Durgabai – not just respectable but also high-profile – in the film was also a radical step. The daughter and daughter-in law of elite Brahmin families of Mumbai, she had inadvertently ventured into a small role in a third-rate Hindi film under financial compulsions and had faced much resultant embarrassment. She was persuaded to play the female lead, through her father whom Govindrao Tembe (a famous stage singer–actor and Shantaram's friend) knew. Tembe was then persuaded to play the male lead with the ruse that it was Durgabai's wish. The compulsions of a talkie, given audience tastes, required the actors to speak meticulous Marathi (the Anglicised

**Plate 13.4:** Scene from *Ayodhyecha Raja*, with Govindrao Tembe as Harishchandra and Durga Khote as Taramati, 1932.

Durgabai had to be specially coached in the proper Marathi grammar and accent) and also to sing well, this being the pre-playback era. (The system of playbacks was introduced in the late 1930s.) The orchestra was positioned behind the camera.

Shantaram deliberately selected the mythological story of Harishchandra because its emotion-packed stage presentation compared with what he saw as Phalke's bland silent film made him realise the valence of dialogue. The significant thematic continuity of the plot over a 90-year period from Vishnudas's play to Phalke's film and further to Prabhat's first talkie has already been underscored.[15] He cast his 'talkie' in the sangit natak mode which had obvious pitfalls – mainly that famous singers had to battle with the time constraint and cram their songs into short slots (as was also required for gramophone records). In his first song the short-sighted Tembe, unable to see without his glasses, got so carried away by his musical elaboration as to misconstrue Shantaram's increasingly frantic signals as his appreciative response. He stopped only when the camera ran out of film, complaining that he had just got warmed up.

The difficulties in shooting the film were legion: the four main partners were basically apprentices to whom work was now allotted on the strength of previous experience. Shantaram had acted in films and partly directed a film under Baburao Painter, Damle had some technical expertise and undertook sound recording, Dhaibar handled photography and Fattehlal art direction. But a lot of exposed film was wasted because the lip movements of actors did not synchronise with the sound. The financial loss was recouped by the partners by selling their wives' jewellery to raise funds. The machinery was checked, the defect corrected, and the film completed. A special screening for important invitees in Kolhapur had to be stopped because the sound did not work. This defect was corrected by Damle by working through the night and the next show the following day made the desired impression.

The film ran in Mumbai's Majestic Cinema for 12 weeks and was suddenly withdrawn by the owners. (Shantaram alleges that one of the owners was Ardeshir Irani who feared it would break

[15] The film evoked as strong a response as Vishnudas's play. The Rani of the small princely state of Jat came out of the cinema hall at one point, unable to control her sobs; Shantaram, *Shantarama*, p. 127.

*Alam Ara*'s record.)[16] But it provided such an impetus to the Marathi film industry that in 1932 there were a total of seven talkies, and the following four years saw the screening of seven, eleven, nine, and six talkies, respectively, by studios in Maharashtra. Many of these were based on popular plays testifying to the symbiotic relationship between theatre and cinema, but revealing a lack of appreciation of the new medium's nature and potential.

The landmark status of this first Prabhat talkie cannot be overstated. Its Hindi version (*Ayodhyaka Raja*) was released the very next year. Crossing the language barrier was an important advance, and Prabhat made several movies simultaneously in both Marathi and Hindi versions, ensuring countrywide audiences. A film took about three months to make, and in quick succession came *Agnikankan* (*Jalti Nishani* in Hindi, 1932) and *Maya-Machchhindra* on the life of the spiritual guru Machchhindranath played by Tembe with queen Kilotala played by Durga Khote (Marathi and Hindi, 1932). *Sinhagad* (Marathi, 1933) was based on a classic historical novel by H.N. Apte which describes the popular episode of Shivajiraje's right-hand man Tanaji Malusare who postponed his son's wedding to capture a strategic hill fort just south of Pune, subsequently renamed Sinhagad: Tanaji's death during the fight was a climactic moment in the film.

Then came another 'first' for Prabhat – the colour film *Sairandhri* (Marathi and Hindi, 1933) on a mythological theme of proven popularity on stage and also handled by Maharashtra Film Company earlier. It had not only massive and impressive sets but was made in colour and processed in Germany, with Shantaram overseeing part of the endeavour. Unfortunately a technical flaw while shooting ruined the colour effects and failed to attract audiences. (No print or negative is available today.) A severe financial loss was the result.

At the end of 1933, after having produced six silent films and five talkies in Kolhapur, Prabhat moved to Pune which had better infrastructural facilities and more crucially, easy access Mumbai. An 11-acre plot of land was bought at the foot of the hill at Erandawane on the western outskirts of the growing city and a modern Prabhat Studio built there. The sound-proof studio for indoor shooting was

[16] Shantaram, *Shantarama*, p. 137.

200' long, 150' wide, and 65' high, and said to be the largest in Asia.[17] In the centre it had a tank which could be filled with water to simulate a pond. In the surrounding open ground was created a garden, a running stream, and other scenic spots for outdoor shooting. An adjacent building housed offices, a library, an air-conditioned laboratory and editing room, a small theatre, a rehearsal room, and rooms for the acting staff, with intercom telephone connections. The proprietors built their bungalows just outside the studio complex, and a tenement building was constructed for the lower-level employees. Prabhat was to make 29 more films, mostly bilingual, and remain functional until 1953, forming a major cultural landmark. This whole belt was officially known as 'Prabhat-nagar'. The road leading eastward from this area to the river (and the city proper) was named 'Prabhat Road' and round signboards with the Prabhat logo (black silhouette of a woman blowing a tutari against an orange background, and a yellow sun rising below, with radiating rays) were fixed on lamp-posts at strategic junctures.[18]

Prabhat Studio was an attraction for the city's residents and visitors.[19] It represented a magic world inhabited by celestial beings, but also a famous site for tourists to visit alongside the Peshwa's palace, Shaniwar Wada, or his hilltop temple, Parvati. It could have been an exclusive world, but made itself inclusive by inviting the public to take two-hour-long guided tours twice a week. On display were huge sets, a rich wardrobe, and a large collection of musical instruments. A quiet dignity pervaded the atmosphere and spontaneous respect was elicited by seniors; diligence and efficiency were a requirement and precluded loitering. This was a tremendous organisation run like a well-oiled machine, with the owners working as hard as others, if not harder and longer. Shantaram Athavale (who worked there from 1935 to 1943 as a lyricist and later also assistant director) lists 15 departments to manage everything from direction, music, camera, editing, sound, actors, and accounts, to stores, which employed over 200 persons. Discipline and punctuality were the keywords: everybody except the partners and senior staff/actors punched a card on arriving

[17] Watve, *Ek Hoti Prabhat-nagari*, p. 79.

[18] These familiar landmarks of my childhood have now vanished, except for the sole signboard affixed to the house built by Vishnupant Damle, now occupied by his grandsons.

[19] Deshpande, 'Ek Hoti Prabhat-nagari', pp. 1–12.

and while leaving, half an hour was initially allotted for lunch, monthly salaries were paid regularly. Prabhat had an extraordinary group of talented artists, but from the owners down, all dressed and behaved like ordinary middle-class men and women, without putting on airs. Dialogue rehearsals – as in theatre – were initially the responsibility of Keshavrao Date, and music rehearsals that of Keshavrao Bhole. Hence Prabhat's pre-eminence among film companies, according to P.L. Deshpande, was comparable to the stature of Gandharva Mandali among theatre companies. There was always curiosity, anticipation, and discussion about Prabhat's next film, its theme, photography, music – as part of general cultural developments.[20]

Soon Prabhat acquired a theatre of its own. The first cinema hall in Pune was 'Aryan' (Plate 13.1) built in 1915 near the city's central vegetable market, to screen Phalke's silent films. In 1934 Sardar Kibe (Kibay) of Indore built the 'Kibe Lakshmi Theatre' near Shaniwar Wada, on the site of their old wada which had burned down in 1926.[21] Prabhat Film Company and its distributors 'Famous Pictures' of Mumbai started managing the theatre (renamed Prabhat Talkies) in partnership and continue to do so to date while its ownership rests with the Kibe family. The original seating arrangement had two classes on the ground floor and a separate section for women; the balcony had four sections: boxes, reserved seats, first class, and the family circle. Here two glass-walled cabins were made to allow mothers of crying infants to watch the film in comfort. This easily became the best cinema hall in Pune.[22] Currently the cinema has only two sections (the ground floor and the balcony) and a seating capacity of almost 900.

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At Pune Prabhat's expansion with the addition of Date and Bhole underscored its link with theatre; its link with the field of literature

[20] Deshpande, 'Ek Hoti Prabhat-nagari'.

[21] The original, large Kibe wada had housed the Female High School (established by Ranade, Bhandarkar, and other reformers about 1880) and also the printing press for the weekly *Dnyan-prakash*; information provided by a Prabhat Talkies pamphlet and personal communication from Mr Ajit Damle, grandson of the original Prabhat partner.

[22] Athavale, *'Prabhat'kal*, p. 19.

was emphasised by inducting novelist and short story writer N.H. Apte to write screenplays.[23] Prabhat's first film at Pune was *Amrit Manthan* (Marathi and Hindi, 1934) directed by V. Shantaram, with music by Bhole. The male lead as the villain was played by Date (and by Chandramohan, a Prabhat 'find', in the Hindi version), supported by the singer Sureshbabu Mane and the female lead by the well-educated Nalini Tarkhad who made her debut, supported by the 16-year-old Shanta Apte. Set in the remote past, the imaginary, didactic and complicated storyline revolves around a pacifist, Buddhist king who is murdered by the orthodox Hindu royal priest who in turn faces a general public outcry and kills himself. The queen and her children are also caught up in the intrigue. The film marked a sea change in having finally escaped the influence of the stage and tapped the potential of the new medium with effective zoom shots and close-ups, and also a trick scene where the villain severs his head and offers it at the goddess's altar as a sacrifice. The film was released simultaneously in Mumbai (in Hindi) and Pune (in Marathi) – the latter at Prabhat Talkies. The film won acclaim at the Venice Film Festival and received a special notice in *The Illustrated London News.* Immediately followed the mythological *Chandrasena* (Marathi, Hindi, and Tamil, 1935) directed by V. Shantaram, with Nalini Tarkhad and Sureshbabu Mane.

Prabhat's cluster of films portraying the lives of saints paralleled the theatre trend. Greatest expectations were aroused by *Dharmatma* (Marathi and Hindi, 1935). The film's original title, *Mahatma*, was changed because of the censor board's objection to its possible political association in the public mind with Mahatma Gandhi. It starred Bal Gandharva in the lead role of the 16th-century Sant Eknath who preached and practised caste equality and eradication of untouchability. The parallel with Gandhi was indeed implicit and some conservative members of the censor board objected to a Dalit girl entering a Brahmin house, and forced some scenes to be cut.[24] K. Narayan Kale acted his adversarial orthodox son Hari-pandit; and little Vasanti as the untouchable girl Jai.[25] Gandharva's entry into cinema was the

[23] N.H. Apte (not to be confused with the classic novelist H.N. Apte) wrote generally progressive novels and short stories.

[24] Athavale, *'Prabhat'kal*, p. 55.

[25] Watve, *Ek Hoti Prabhat-nagari*, pp. 100–08. For all Shantaram's emphasis on realism, Kale had not had his head tonsured, as was obligatory for Brahmin

most publicised attempt at networking with the theatre world. On the strength of their old acquaintance and a great deal of respect, V. Shantaram offered him a chance to retrieve his fast-disappearing reputation and finances through a contract to act in Prabhat Films, at a payment of Rs 1 lakh each. The news of Gandharva in a Prabhat film ignited great curiosity. No photos of him in the role were displayed; instead, all advertisements showed the special portrait taken of him in a long black coat, tight white leggings, and a turban.

But the film was a debacle and a financial disaster for Prabhat. Gandharva's failure to adjust to the cinematic technique – and to bring his charisma to a male role – came as a disappointment to his eager admirers. He could not adapt to the new medium – with its piecemeal shooting of scenes, retakes, strong lighting, and the absence of a live and adulatory audience on which he had thrived. He would constantly forget his lines and even lose his script. Special prompting was provided for him by the assistant director Athavale, with his lines written in big letters on a board that he could see. During a long and difficult trolley shot, Athavale was required to walk alongside the trolley, prompting him in a soft voice. When even that failed and Shantaram took Athavale to task, Gandharva admitted sheepishly that the fault was his – his right ear was defective.[26] The entire experience was enough to make him opt out, and Shantaram graciously terminated the contract. The film flopped. (The failure of Gandharva's second film *Amrit-siddhi*, made in collaboration with Baburao Ruikar, kept Gandharva away from cinema permanently.)

By contrast Prabhat's *Sant Tukaram* (the first Prabhat film at Pune to be made only in Marathi, 1936) was a regional and even international success. It was directed by Damle and Fattehlal and had Vishnupant Pagnis, originally a stage stri-party, in the title role. In contrast to the ineffectual (and according to some also effeminate) Gandharva, Pagnis came across as a gentle and truly saintly person of the 17th century who is immersed in his worship of Vitthal, neglecting his family responsibilities, much to the annoyance of his shrill but warm-hearted and loving wife. Rising above the harassment meted out by his

men; he let his hair grow in the fashion of young men of the 1930s and was critiqued by many, e.g., Athavale, *'Prabhat'kal*, p. 53; Bodas, *Majhi Bhumika*, p. 109.

[26] Athavale, *'Prabhat'kal*, pp. 47–51.

self-styled rivals, he is finally carried away to heaven in a birdlike vehicle sent by his god to fetch him. The film ran for 57 consecutive weeks in Mumbai's Central Cinema and in Pune's Prabhat Talkies for 41 weeks, and was adjudged one of the three best films at the Venice International Film Festival.

Surprisingly, audience participation came into play here: people lined up outside a shop owned partly by the Pagnis family in Mumbai to touch the feet of the 'saint'. This also happened later with the release of Shanta Apte's *Gopalkrishna* (1938): an admirer came to Prabhat Studio to pick up a handful of soil from the spot visited by 'Radha', as a sacred artefact.[27]

Later came *Sant Dnyaneshwar* (1940) with Shahu Modak, directed by Damle; *Sant Sakhu* (Marathi and Hindi, 1942) with Hansa Wadkar in the title role (Plate 14.3) and directed by Damle and Fettehlal; and *Sant Janabai* (Marathi and Hindi, directed by Govind Ghanekar) again with Hansa Wadkar in the lead role.

Two of Prabhat's fantasy-based Hindi films are remarkable for a progressive message. *Vahaan* (There, directed by K. Narayan Kale, 1937) portrays the supposedly pre-historic – and suggestively anti-colonial – clash between the oppressive Aryas and the resisting non-Aryas, as a backdrop for a love story. It starred Leela Chitnis, Shanta Apte, Ulhas, and Chandramohan. *Amar-jyoti* (The Eternal Flame, directed by V. Shantaram, 1936) starred Durga Khote as a feminist pirate leader Saudamini rebelling against a royal establishment which treats women oppressively and which has ousted her from her family (and society) after snatching away her little son Sudhir. This Sudhir reappears as a shepherd grazing his cattle in the woods near the pirates' cave hideout, but his real identity is unknown even to himself. Shanta Apte is a princess whose ship Saudamini captures and whom she wins over to her feminism; she falls in love with Sudhir. K. Narayan Kale plays Shekhar, Saudamini's cerebral but level-headed advisor, and Chandramohan a villainous royal officer whom Saudamini has subjugated and kept in chains. The complicated plot ends on a tamely optimistic note of gender complementarity which supposedly ensures equality in marriage but stresses essentialised gender roles with Saudamini succumbing to her maternal love for Sudhir, now revealed as her lost son. Finally Saudamini retires,

[27] Athavale, *'Prabhat'kal*, pp. 75, 101–02.

leaving the next generation of 'equal' spouses to establish a gender-egalitarian society.

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Even while continuing with extravagant mythologicals, devotionals, and fantasy-based films, Prabhat promoted a socially progressive agenda with family-oriented themes. Paralleling the trend set by its contemporary, socially aware theatre, or even transcending it, Prabhat produced films informed by a clearly articulated progressive ideology. Arguably its greatest contribution came through its highly popular trio of social films (*Kunku*, *Manoos*, and *Shejari*) which have earned a pride of place in the company's history with their sincerity and thematic variety.

The New Woman was one component of Prabhat's cautiously promoted social agenda which was enabled by the increasing collaboration of famous authors. For instance, the film *Kunku* (*Duniya na Mane* in Hindi, 1937) was based on N.H. Apte's story and used his screenplay and dialogues. It protests against the practice of old widowers marrying young women. The young wife's silent protest culminates in his repentance in the film's climax. The title derives from the belief that a married woman places the red kunku dot on her forehead in the name of her husband; a widow loses this right. Every morning the protagonist hesitates while wearing her kunku, seeing the image of her detested husband before her eyes.

The film's technical and directorial finesse is outstanding. The opening scene cleverly stresses the thematic and practical linkages between theatre and cinema by showing a group of children enacting a scene from Deval's *Sharada*, based on the same theme as the film – and thus serves as an equivalent of a stage prologue introducing the main theme. This enactment is the idea of Neera, a college-educated young urban woman who has been suddenly orphaned and compelled to seek shelter with her maternal uncle (Mama) and his family in a Konkan village. This impoverished Mama succumbs to greed when the elderly Kakasaheb, a renowned lawyer of Pune, makes an offer for Neera, promising a large payment. The prospective bride is 'viewed' by his family friend and a young man whom Neera mistakes for the groom. During the wedding, a stunned Neera is physically compelled by Mama to garland Kakasaheb in the crucial ceremony.

But she cannot accept him as her husband and refuses to submit to him. Her subsequent protest against this injustice – generalised by her into a larger cause embracing all young women who are forced into the same situation – is the substance of the film. She keeps at bay not only Kakasaheb but also his son Pandit who is her own age and makes overtures to her. (Plate 14.1 shows her compelling Pandit – played by Raja Nene who later became popular in Marathi films – to apologise to his father for this misdemeanour.) Neera also establishes a warm equation with Kakasaheb's daughter Chitra, a social worker, who is older than her and a source of moral support (played by Shakuntala Paranjpye, England-educated daughter of Wrangler R.P. Paranjpye). The film concludes on a mixed emotional note: Neera's moral victory is coupled with the repentant and now-fatherly Kakaseheb's suicide leaving a note that she is now free and should marry a suitable young man. This was by far the most forceful cinematic statement against marriages unequal in age.

An outstanding element of the film's realism is the complete absence of background music – made up for by household sounds, street noises, bird calls, and other sounds which form the natural context to daily life. The musical accompaniment for songs is provided by clever ideas such as the rhythmic tinkling of a spoon against a small metal water pot. The songs themselves span a wide variety – from one sung by a young and rugged street musician accompanied by a harmonium, to a women's traditional group song – led by Neera – to celebrate a *mangala-gauri* function, and further to her rendering of Longfellow's 'Psalm of Life' in the Western musical style, displaying great versatility.

*Manoos* (*Admi* in Hindi, 1939) attempted the theme of the 'fallen woman' for the first time, although she was a popular figure in British drama from the late 19th to the early 20th century, in three *avatar*s: the seduced maiden, the wicked seductress, and the repentant magdalen.[28] For the puritanical and prudish Maharashtrian society, however, the possible – but not probable – rehabilitation of a prostitute was a bold and courageous theme in the late 1930s.

[28] Sos Eltis, 'The Fallen Woman on Stage: Maidens, Magdalens, and the Emancipated Female' in Kerry Powell (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 222–36.

This love story of a prostitute, Maina (Shanta Hublikar), and a police constable, Ganpat (Shahu Modak), is set in Mumbai's red-light district near Grant Road (which was recreated in Prabhat Studio). Maina is introduced as a seemingly carefree and jolly entertainer, catering to any customer who will pay, through a 10-minute song which starts in Marathi but then traverses over Gujarati, Bengali, Tamil, and Telugu in five stanzas to please her ethnically diverse clientele. (The song, 'Why talk of tomorrow?', became immensely popular and has provided the title for Hublikar's autobiography.) Her loneliness is underscored by her sole friend, a young lad (played by Ram Marathe who became a renowned stage/film actor and singer) who works for a tea-stall and keeps up a steady supply of tea for her customers. Also revealed is her well-concealed, warm and caring nature as well as her vulnerability to exploitation on many levels – her maternal uncle who has first introduced her to this life as a way out of poverty drops in routinely to extort money from her.

Representing the average middle- and lower-middle-class morality, Ganpat initially displays the standard patriarchal prejudice and disgust for Maina until she lays bare the compulsions that force a woman into prostitution (Plate 14.2). Having succumbed to her genuine warmth and fallen in love with her, he presents her to his simple and devout mother (played by the famous singer Bai Sundarabai who sings two devotional songs in the film). The mother approves of the prospective daughter-in-law who, however, steals out of the house, unable to deceive the gullible old lady. Later Maina kills her oppressive, drunkard uncle in a tussle, is arrested – with coincidental irony – by Ganpat, and later sentenced to life imprisonment. Though devastated by the turn of events, Ganpat remains true to the promise Maina has extracted from him not to give in to depression but to follow his duty without fail. As the film ends, the backdrop for the credits shows him marching on, winning promotions as indicated by the stripes on his uniform, while Maina serves her jail term. Maina's dream of marrying and settling down to a normal life is thwarted by fate – and by the story-teller's awareness of a society not prepared to accept an upright, law-abiding (and law-enforcing) citizen marrying a prostitute. Although patriarchy predictably wins in the end, the film succeeds in projecting a dual message: that a prostitute is usually a victim of circumstances who can be reinstated as an acceptable member of society, and that young men should not let disappointment in love interfere with their duty and career trajectory.

The film was acclaimed as the best picture of the year by the Film Journalists' Association of India. Directed by V. Shantaram, it was based on the short story 'The Police Constable' by Bhaskarrao Amembel; the screenplay and lyrics were written by the well-known writer Anant Kanekar.

*Shejari* (*Padosi* in Hindi, 1941), with a screenplay by Vishram Bedekar and direction by V. Shantaram, makes a strong statement for Hindu–Muslim unity (seen also in the close friendship between Prabhat's partners, Damle and Fattehlal). The two friends and neighbours, Jivba (Keshavrao Date) and Mirza (Gajanan Jagirdar) are respected as the village elders, and counsel the villagers not to sell their lands to a company which plans to build a dam nearby because it would submerge the whole village.[29] Jivba's son Raiba (Chandrakant) is in love with Girija (Jayshree), the daughter of the dam engineer Omkar.[30] With help from his assistant, Omkar succeeds in creating a rift between the two old friends by getting Jivba dismissed from his job and implicating Mirza as the instigator. After a series of incidents which strengthen the split, Raiba decides to blow up the dam. He is stopped in time by Jivba who grabs and throws away the torch in Raiba's hand – which happens to fall on the explosives. The dam is partly destroyed, Jivba is stranded on the remaining portion of its wall, and Mirza tries to save him at risk to his own life. But the structure collapses under them and the two friends plunge to their death together, hand in hand, in a final melodramatic touch.

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But Prabhat soon disintegrated. In 1937 Dhaibar left the company, opened his own but failed. Shantaram himself left Prabhat in 1942 after an internal conflict. At this time Damle and Fattehlal, the only owners of Prabhat brought in outsiders on a higher salary instead of promoting well-qualified insiders. The history of Prabhat's origin repeated itself, and in 1943 a large group of experienced and loyal members left Prabhat as a bloc in protest.[31] Cliques, intrigues, and indiscipline

[29] In the Hindi version, Mazhar Khan was made to play Jivba and Jagirdar Mirza; Athavale, *'Prabhat'kal*, pp. 138–39.

[30] Shantaram married Jayshree (who debuted in the film) in 1941, much to the consternation of his first wife whom he continued to visit regularly.

[31] Athavale, *'Prabhat'kal*, pp. 175, 239.

now started. To Prabhat's incipient disintegration was added Damle's death in 1945. Finally the company was auctioned.[32]

Prabhat's last noteworthy film was the historical *Ramshastri* (Marathi and Hindi, 1944) on the life of an upright judge who had the courage to pronounce the interim Peshwa Raghunathrao guilty of having had his nephew Narayanrao assassinated. It was directed successively by Raja Nene, Vishram Bedekar, and Gajanan Jagirdar (who played the title role).

Prabhat's later films were mostly Hindi: *Chand* (1945) with Prem Adib, Begum Para, Sitara, and Sapru; *Lakharani* (directed by Vishram Bedekar, 1945) with Durga Khote, Sapru, and Guru Dutt as a debutant; *Hum Ek Hain* (1946) with Durga Khote and Rehana in which Dev Anand made his debut; *Aage Badho* (1947) with Dev Anand; and *Aparadhi* (1948) with Madhubala. Prabhat's last film was the Marathi *Gurudev Datta* (1951). The studio closed down in 1953 after having made films which were popular all over India and won acclaim overseas. Its property was sold to a private party but was later bought by the government to house the Film and Television Institute of India. The prints of all Prabhat films had been bought by one Mr Mudaliar from South India from whom Anantrao Damle (Vishnupant's son) acquired them in 1970; they are now the property of the Damle family.

## V. Shantaram and Rajkamal Kalamandir

After leaving Prabhat in 1942 Shantaram served for a few months as the chief producer for the Films Advisory Board and made documentary films including one about the Cripps Commission's visit to India. It was approved despite the failure of the visit because Shantaram promoted it as a symbol of Indo-British co-operation under the title *A Gallant Effort.* The same year he launched his own studio Rajkamal Kalamandir at Parel in Mumbai, which produced mainly Hindi films. Its first feature film was *Shakuntala* (Hindi, 1943) starring Jayshree in the popular classic which seemed to have gripped the Maharashtrian imaginary.[33] *Dr Kotnis Ki Amar Kahani* (The Immortal Story of Dr Kotnis, 1946) handled a very different topic, the story of

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 185.

[33] Shantaram had married Jayshree in 1941 and divorced her in 1956 to immediately marry Sandhya (née Vijaya Deshmukh). Through all this he continued to visit his first wife and their children.

a Maharashtrian medical doctor (who formed part of a contingent of four volunteers sent by the Government of India to help China), his marriage to a Chinese woman, and his death during a battle. The film is said to have 'pleased the British, the nationalists, and the Communists all at the same time'.[34] It had Shantaram in the title role and also starred Baburao Pendharkar. Rajkamal's *Lokshahir Ramjoshi/ Matwala Shayar Ramjoshi* (Marathi/Hindi, 1947) depicted the life of the 18th–19th century Brahmin balladeer and lavani-composer Ram Joshi and set the trend of 'tamasha films'. The trend was consolidated by *Amar Bhoopali* (1951) on the life of the shahir Honaji. After Independence, Rajkamal made several highly successful films including *Jhanak Jhanak Payal Baje* (1955) and *Do Aankhe Barah Hath* (1957), both with Sandhya. The former film also starred the renowned Kathak dancer Gopi Krishna and was the love story of two dancers; the latter showed the rehabilitation of six convicts in a halfway house under the supervision of an idealistic warden (played by Shantaram).

In 1961 came Rajkamal's *Stree*, starring Sandhya as Shakuntala, Shantaram as Dushyant, and introducing Rajshree (his daughter by Jayshree) who became a famous heroine of Hindi films. This traced another thematic continuity from Kirloskar's debut musical *Shakuntal* in 1880, eight decades earlier.[35]

## Smaller Film Companies

When the talkies sealed the fate of theatre, film companies predictably mushroomed. The ruler of the princely state of Kolhapur lent patronage to Kolhapur Cinetone (with Baburao Pendharkar as manager and main star) and launched Shalini Cinetone in the 1930s; both were short-lived.

Huns Pictures was founded in 1936 mainly by Baburao Pendharkar and Master Vinayak (Shataram's maternal cousins), with Pandurang Naik. P.K. Atre was invited to join them, though initially he lacked an adequate knowledge of the process.[36] Huns' first film *Chhaya* had

[34] Rajadhyaksha and Willemen, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*, p. 214.

[35] The physical residues of Rajkamal in Pune are Shantaram's three private bungalows: Rajkamal 3 within Prabhat-nagar, and Rajkamal 1 and 2 located on Prabhat Road outside it at a little distance.

[36] Atre, *Mi Kasa Zalo?* pp. 262–96.

the storyline by the famous writer V.S. Khandekar (who was later to win the Jnanpith Award). This was allegedly the first tragedy on the screen, depicting the victimisation of a woman (Leela Chitnis in a debut performance) by a doctor in return for saving her son. The film won the first prize from the Calcutta Press Association and the Gohar Gold Medal.

Their next two films marked Atre's entry into the film world and were followed by four more. *Dharmavir* (Marathi and Hindi, 1937) was based on Ibsen's *A Pillar of Society* about a humanitarian who turns out to be a hypocrite; the lead role was played by Pendharkar and a light role by Vinayak. Atre's second script was *Premavir* (1937), an unsuccessful comedy with Vinayak in the lead role. This was followed by Khandekar's *Jwala* (Marathi and Hindi) based on a Macbeth-like character tailor-made for the actor Chandramohan, but it failed due to constant changes made by Vinayak. The company suffered a huge financial loss from which Atre was requested to rescue them. This he achieved by writing the script of *Brahmachari* (The Celibate, Marathi and Hindi, 1938), showing the futile efforts of a young man (played by Vinayak) who has taken a vow of celibacy under the influence of Hindu right-wing rhetoric, but is unable to resist the overtures made by a pretty young woman (played by Meenakshi, grandmother of Hindi actresses Shilpa and Namrata Shirodkar). Meenakshi's song sequence, while prancing about daringly in an old-fashioned swimsuit near a pool, predictably created a great sensation – with the male gaze rivetted on the scantily clad actress. The film, completed in three months, was a blockbuster.[37] It was followed by *Brandichi Batli* (A Bottle of Brandy, 1939) centring on a clash of traditional and modern lifestyles and promoting the government policy of prohibition. Atre's sixth and last script for the company was the serious family story *Ardhangi* (The Better Half, 1940).

Atre then started Navayug Chitrapat Ltd into which Huns Pictures was merged and also launched the weekly *Navayug* primarily to publicise the company's films. Its first film, based on Atre's script, *Lapandav* (Hide and Seek, 1940) had a serious and much discussed theme of the gradually dimming marriage prospects of young women after a certain age; the role was played by the well-educated actress Vanamala. But within a few months internal conflicts among the partners compelled Atre to resign; some other partners also left soon.

[37] Rajadhyaksha and Willemen, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*, p. 275.

Vinayak moved Navayug to Pune and produced *Lagna Pahave Karun* (One should Try Marriage), a satire on the evils of the dowry system based on a story by the humorist C.V. Joshi with the screenplay by V.S. Khandekar. Following a further split shortly, Vinayak remained alone. Baburao Pendharkar and Pandurang Naik started New Huns at Kolhapur.

Meanwhile Atre had launched 'Atre Pictures' in Mumbai with Haribhau Mote (better known as a successful publisher) and made a social film *Payachi Dasi* about an 'enslaved' wife caught between an oppressive mother-in-law (played by Durga Khote) and an ineffectual husband. Then came the historical *Vasantasena.* Atre's later Marathi films were the farcical *Moruchi Mavshi* (1949), based on the English play *Charlie's Aunt* and the serious *Shyamchi Aai* (1953) based on the famous story by Sane Guruji which became extremely famous and won the President's gold medal.

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The 15 years from the advent of the talkies to Independence (1932–1946) witnessed a total of 55 film companies which together produced 129 Marathi films.[38] These – as well as the numerous plays before them – were linked by a thematic continuity: there were more than 50 mythologicals, and also some devotionals (e.g. the lives of saints). The 14 historical films were almost entirely devoted to the period of Shivajiraje. Many themes were reinterpreted by different film companies as they had been by theatre companies before them. The novelty lay in the burgeoning of social themes – these were relatively scarce on stage and during silent film days (the exception being *Savkari Pash*); there were more than 40 talkies on social themes.

The single largest producer of Marathi films of the period was Prabhat, with 18 films in 15 years, most of them also in Hindi versions. It made more than 18 films only in Hindi. Of other companies, Saraswati Cinetone produced 12, Huns Pictures eight, Navayug seven, Shalini Cinetone five, Kolhapur Cinetone four, New Huns and Atre Pictures three each. The remaining companies were too short-lived to progress beyond one or two films. Prabhat was the only company with a sound financial basis, because of its systematic planning and its own distribution network which brought undivided

[38] Mujawar, *Maharashtra*, pp. 84–89.

profits. Financial instability later led to a decline of the Marathi film industry. Conspicuous during the period from the late 1920s to the late 1940s was the domination of the broad family network including V. Shantaram and his cousins Baburao Pendharkar and Master Vinayak, though not as a monolithic bloc, nor always unitedly.

## Crossing the Media Divide: Cinema–Theatre Networks

The entertainment scene in the 1930s and 1940s was characterised by an imbrication of theatre and cinema coupled with disjunctures and ruptures. Different types of plays jostled for audience attention, and were in turn threatened with ejection by the budding film industry. Two simultaneous but contradictory processes were at work: the rivalry between the two media intensified, even while the theatre–cinema connection formed a large network, with individuals making lateral moves within it. Given the origins of cinema as the inheritor of the theatre mantle, these attempts to cross the media divide abounded. Shantaram Athavale stresses two continuities: even the successful Prabhat actors like Date and Kale were unable to sever the influence of their original theatre medium; and film music followed the theatre tradition of inserting songs to suit a scene and writing lyrics to the chosen tune.[39]

In hindsight this signifies a relatively seamless cultural transition in terms of the themes handled and ethos projected by the new medium. Many of the progressive Natya Manwantar group gravitated to cinema, especially to Prabhat. The involvement of renowned writers in providing film scripts reinforces the feeling of a totality of cultural inputs into cinema: among the well-known script-writers were Atre and Bedekar who had achieved fame in the theatre world as well as the novelist Khandekar and short-story writer N.H. Apte. In terms of storylines Atre's inputs were mixed: mostly light parodies, with a couple of serious touches. Bedekar had traversed a long distance from his *Brahmakumari* days. Along with Dinanath's Balwant Company, he gravitated towards films; after its closure, he continued with Bhat-Bedekar Productions; studied film-making briefly in England in 1938 but was compelled to return home by the outbreak of World War I; wrote a novel; and then joined Prabhat as script-writer

[39] Athavale, *'Prabhat'kal*, pp. 16–17, 247, 255.

and director. But there is little serious discursive overlap between the play-scripts and screenplays by Atre and Bedekar.

The temptation and compulsion to enter this rival industry was strong also for many actors in the mid-1930s. But the most successful theatre personalities – like Gandharva and Dinanath – failed mainly because of their emphasis on singing, while less eminent ones – like Vishnupant Pagnis and Keshavrao Date – succeeded.

The 'migration' of entertainment from theatre to cinema has other interesting aspects. Silent films had the advantages of novelty, impressive sets, magic effects, cheaper tickets, and easier accessibility. But initially they failed to offer a serious challenge to the sangit natak, in view of the firm equation of music and entertainment in the public mind; it was with Prabhat's first 'talkie' in 1932 that cinema was poised to surpass theatre.

The film industry then revolutionised the cultural scene all over India by practically throttling the hegemonic theatre as the prime provider of public entertainment. In some ways this was a real disjuncture in spatial terms – as a form of 'migration'. The film industry had several centres in western Maharashtra, first Nashik, but then mainly Mumbai, Pune, and Kolhapur. For a film company, geographical location assumed importance in view of the studio as the base where the major part of a film was shot and at times processed. The whole studio paraphernalia was permanently stationed here. Theatre companies did not possess a similarly significant base.

But while theatre performances needed at best specially constructed theatres with a proscenium stage and at worst makeshift rural playhouses, films did not initially require a specific type of venue for their screening. Although their preferred setting was the movie theatre, they could be exhibited in existing playhouses fitted with a large screen, or dark open spaces with the minimal equipment of a projector and a screen, or even in temporarily pitched tents. In fact Phalke had some of his first cinema experiences in tents in Mumbai. This mobility ensured a far wider outreach than plays, and in a sense harked back to the days of Bhave's mythologicals which did not require a well-equipped playhouse. Cinema also enjoyed easy mobility in that no troupe of actors and supporting staff needed to be transported from place to place.

For the public at large, cinema was also a far cheaper form of entertainment than theatre and far more accessible through several daily shows. Through visuality it acquired a mass appeal, independent of a refined taste for classical music and the partly cerebral engagement demanded by the socially aware plays. The upper-caste, middle-class milieu of theatre now gave way to a truly democratic mass participation. The vast popularity, especially of the 'talkies', is reflected in the number of films produced.

On the negative side was the impersonal nature of the cinema experience. Bhave's mythologicals afforded the greatest opportunities for audience participation. Subsequent musical and prose plays placed the audience at one remove from the action on the stage, but still provided the pleasure of seeing real live actors. The characters on the silver screen, no matter how lively, offered no human contact.

An additional reason lies in a different dimension of the prevalent morality. As men interacting on stage with other men, female impersonators could be free and easy – and even flirtatious – in their manner, which contributed to their attractiveness. Given the rigid gender codes that governed female behaviour, the few early Marathi stage actresses of the 1920s and 1930s were compelled to be far more prudish and decorous in their acting. The final challenge to the hegemony of female impersonators on stage came both from within – when their advanced age made cross-dressing less convincing – and from without, when women of respectable families started performing on stage. But the fatal blow was dealt by the talkies which necessitated the participation of actresses, and not actors with voices which could pass off as women's.

The practice was pioneered with great success by Prabhat's more sophisticated films (showing close-ups, for example) which required women to play female roles. As already mentioned, Bal Gandharva's film *Amrit-siddhi* clearly exposes the limits and artificiality of an actor (of any age) playing a female role, which may not have been so brutally apparent on stage or may have been accepted by an audience conditioned to be more tolerant – as audiences had been even in the case of Phalke's films. Now Prabhat's induction of Durga Khote led the way for other talented singer–actresses – especially Shanta Apte, Shanta Hublikar, Leela Chitnis, Hansa Wadkar, and Snehaprabha Pradhan (as described in the next chapter), even while the continuity

with musical plays was re-asserted by the talkies by accepting the integrality of music.

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Today Marathi cinema has survived – albeit not without a struggle – the threat from the prolific productions of Mumbai's 'Bollywood'. Its output is predictably uneven in terms of quality, but the networking and crossing over between Marathi theatre and Marathi as well as Hindi cinema (and also television) still continues, though less frantically than in the 1930s and 1940s. Technically speaking, the only substantial change in cinema is the routine use of colour films. But no further paradigm change has occurred. Thus these two pre-Independence decades still remain the last defining moment in Maharashtra's entertainment culture.

# 14

# The Early Silver Stars

A fortunate coincidence has made available to us the self-narratives of most pioneering stars of the silver screen which enables not only a reconstruction of their individual lives but also the social and familial circumstances which led them to make the difficult choice of entering the still morally suspect film industry and shaped their functioning within it.

The autobiographies of Western actresses – especially stage actresses who have the time and opportunity to enter into a particular character and develop an affinity with the playwright's ideology – are said to differ from those of other women because their primary gender identity, socially constructed for all women, is overlaid in their case by two more layers: new stage identities (sometimes temporary but capable of leaving a lasting impact) consciously constructed by their performative careers and further their new autobiographical selves created during the process of self narration.[1] The case of film actresses may differ in that the nature of film-making in short disparate sequences without a chronological order offers them no opportunity to grow into a character (with rare recorded exceptions) and delve deep to discover shades of a personality.

The present situation involves a further difference – that some of these Marathi life-stories have been narrated to ghost-writers whose discretion may have introduced a certain slant, and emphasised, underplayed, or omitted material. Thus the film actresses' life-stories lack performative identities and resemble other women's narratives.

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[1] Mary Jean Corbett, 'Performing Identities: Actresses and Autobiography' in Powell (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre*, pp. 109–26.

They usually do not even discuss the merits of their films or roles, but project themselves primarily or solely as women of their times – as daughters, sisters, wives, mothers – and only secondarily as actresses. Then again, being an actress in these cases tends to be defined simply as being a working woman with a specific type of work (not even necessarily a career) which involved a social stigma and greater uncertainty than a regular permanent employment (which young, lower-middle-class women had just begun to enter under financial strain). The narratives shed light on the life conditions of the actresses and society's response to them (which were partly dependent on their original social background) and the working of the film industry.

A great deal has been written about 'scopophilia' or the male gaze trained on the female body put on display for men's pleasure. Pre-Independence cinema has only a solitary instance of this – in the scene from *Brahmachari* (1938) daringly showing Meenakshi Shirodkar in a swimsuit. But a mild tendency in this direction started independently with Jayshree's entry into Prabhat films with *Shejari* (1941). Earlier even Prabhat's portrayal of a prostitute in *Manoos* (1939) had shown Shanta Hublikar decently clad: her transgression lay in entertaining male clients through song but never through provocative postures. Other than her fashionable appearance (a five-yard sari, attractively braided hair, and a handbag) there was nothing to separate her from the average young middle-class woman. Shantaram's later films with Jayshree and especially with Sandhya increasingly lost their social focus and catered to the male gaze by focusing on the female body. Gone was the socially progressive albeit mild contestation of patriarchal norms, now replaced by its polar opposite through sheer visuality. But in the pre-Independence era this was not a concern for actresses.

## Kamalabai Gokhale

Screen pioneers working in rudimentary studios are often obscured by the sparkling string of later actresses who shone in a well-regulated industry. One such pioneer was Kamalabai Gokhale née Kamat (1901–1998) who acted both on stage and screen, as mentioned earlier (see also Plate 10.4).[2] Her debut film was the mythological

[2] Bahadur and Vanarase, 'The Personal and Professional Problems of a Woman Performer', pp. 22–25; Kumtakar, 'Kamlabai Kamat: First Woman Artiste of Cinema', p. 10.

*Mohini Bhasmasur* (1914, Phalke's second feature film after *Raja Harishchandra*) in which 13-year-old Kamala played Mohini, a celestial beauty. The cast – earning a monthly salary ranging from Rs 10 to 50 – lived with the Phalke family at Nashik in an extended household, where Kamala and her mother helped in the daily chores; Kamala also looked after Phalke's little daughter Mandakini. The day-long outdoor shooting was done at three different locations in and around Nashik, and after dinner the men helped Phalke with technical preparations for the next day's shooting, while the two women helped Mrs Phalke to wash the day's processed film in the fountain outside their bungalow. When the Kamat women left to return to the stage, Phalke rewarded them with Rs 2,000 in cash, four saris, and eight *tola*s of gold each. Kamalabai later made several silent films and two talkies.

The famous stars of the silver screen followed a couple of decades after Kamalabai's debut. Coincidentally, five of these have recorded their life-stories, often with authorial assistance, which throw light on their contemporary society and film industry. They are arranged here broadly by the year of their film debut.

## Durga Khote

Skilfully and nostalgically, Durga Khote (1905–1991), née Vitha Laud (nicknamed Banoo), evokes the opulent lifestyle of her large Gaud Saraswat Brahmin family of Goan origin, living in a sprawling house in Girgaum in Mumbai.[3] She enjoyed a privileged existence, straddling two social worlds – the conventional world of her extended family and the Anglicised world created by her mother in their upstairs apartment for the nuclear family – Banoo, two older daughters, and a younger son. Her father P.S. Laud was a highly successful solicitor, with a passion for theatre which young Banoo shared. From the age of five she accompanied her father to every performance of Bal Gandharva, a family friend, who refused to let her act even a small part, because 'once make-up is put on the face, it never comes off'. Her maternal grandmother had a passion for Hindustani classical music (which respectable women of the time could not indulge in), and provided financial and practical support for V.N. Bhatkhande in his valuable effort at notating classical ragas. Her maternal family also owned the

[3] Khote, *Mi – Durga Khote*.

historic 'Shantaram's Chawl' in Girgaum, a venue for political meetings and oratory of the likes of Motilal Nehru, Lala Lajpatrai, C.R. Das, and the Patel brothers.

After passing out from Cathedral School (the best British school in Mumbai, with a small Indian quota), Banoo entered St. Xavier's College and shone as a college beauty, bright student, and talented actress in college plays. This carefree life ended abruptly when she was married at 18 to Vishwanath Khote, an only child of another eminent Saraswat family of Mumbai, whom she had known sporadically since childhood because of family friendship. Khote had just returned from England without having studied anything, because his ailing mother (a proud and strict daughter of Justice K.T. Telang) wanted to see him married during her lifetime. (She lived for many more years, as it happened.) The wedding was celebrated on a lavish scale, featuring a music concert by the great Kesarbai Kerkar.

Banoo was catapulted into married life as Durgabai Khote under the strict supervision of her mother-in-law and practically incarcerated in the house, while her husband lived the life of the idle rich, spending most of his time at the club. Her only solace during the following three years was her two children, Bakul and Harin. In mid-1926 trouble suddenly erupted when Khote senior lost heavily in business and on the share market. Creditors took possession of everything, including the cars and the houses. Unable to find cheap alternative accommodation, Banoo had to accept her father's offer of a spacious flat in the family's newly built Laud Mansion (which still stands) near Charni Road Station. Durgabai struggled to find a job: both obvious avenues of employment for women were closed to her – teaching (which required a college degree) and nursing. She managed to give private tuitions in English, and earned Rs 55 a month. Khote reluctantly accepted a minor job found for him in Bombay Municipality at Rs 150 a month, and held it despite frequent absences because of the courtesy extended by his superiors.

Another turning point came in 1930. Durgabai's older sister was approached by Mr Wadia, a college friend, who was making a silent film, *Farebi Jaal* (Trapped), with Mr Mohan Bhavnani. As a concession to the emerging 'talkies', they wanted to add a 10-minute clip with a Hindi dialogue and a song, done by a respectable young woman to play the heroine's (Mrs Bhavnani's) sister. Durgabai's name was suggested by her sister in the innocent belief that this would be like a play in a social gathering in college. The shooting lasted two nights,

with Durgabai playing a woman battered to death by her drunkard husband; and earned her Rs 250. What she and her sister did not know was that this formed the opening sequence, after which the heroine leaves home and takes shelter in a prostitute's house where women are shown drinking, smoking, and engaging in explicit scenes. The result was an utter disaster in artistic and social terms. The advertisements deliberately exploited Durgabai's social status, underscoring that the film was the debut of 'the daughter of the renowned Solicitor Laud, and daughter-in-law of the famous Khote family'. She became the object of vicious gossip and was accused of having tarnished the reputation of both families. Her parents stood solidly behind her though, and her father even told her, 'No matter what the picture is like, you have shown a way for women to earn a living!'[4] This was arguably the first vestige of legitimacy bestowed upon a woman's film career.

Before the gossip died down a genuine opportunity came her way to reinstate her image. Prabhat's Shantaram and Tembe (an old family acquaintance) approached her to act in his mythological bi-lingual film, *Ayodhyecha Raja.* Her father gave reluctant permission, laying down several conditions; and a three-month contract was signed for Rs 2,250. Khote accompanied Durgabai to Kolhapur (where Prabhat was located at the time), the children stayed on in Mumbai with their grandparents. Durgabai recounts having learnt valuable lessons in acting during that time: perfect Marathi and Hindi, voice modulation, emoting, correct postures and facial angles for the camera, appropriate and attractive hairstyles, and musical training from Tembe (because all the actors had to sing their own songs in the pre-playback era). The film was released in Mumbai in 1932 and received great acclaim. It was a vast improvement on the two recent Hindi films on the Harishchandra episode – made by Madan and Krishna Film Companies – which were in the style of the Parsi Urdu theatre, replete with songs and dances, and without skilful use of the new medium. Prabhat's film had much more to offer in terms of realistic sets and outdoor shooting, and 'changed people's taste and their perspective on cinema'.[5] It redeemed Durgabai's reputation and catapulted her to fame and popularity. So deeply affected was Mr Laud that he watched the evening show every single day (buying

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 35.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 63.

his own ticket), prompting the Prabhat crowd to joke that he had reimbursed Prabhat for what they had paid his daughter. Film offers poured in, but were rejected for being substandard.

Later in 1932 came Prabhat's offer for the bi-lingual *Maya-Machchhindra* in which Durgabai played Kilotala, queen of a female kingdom, who rode a horse, wielded a sword, and was accompanied by a female cheetah as a pet (cover photo). During this stint of shooting, she made the acquaintance of the princely family of Kolhapur which later set up two film companies.

Meanwhile, New Theatre of Calcutta offered her the lead role in *Rajrani Mira*, opposite Prithviraj Kapoor. The pair made three more Hindi films in quick succession – *Sita*, *Inquilab*, and *Jivan-natak*; they were made in Bengali with a different cast. (Arguably the pair's last best-known film was *Mughal-e-Azam* in 1960).

Durgabai later set up Natraj Films in partnership, but without success. Khote, who had depended on her financially, died of a heart attack in 1938, and her affectionate father died two years later. Her second marriage with a Muslim admirer, Mr Rashid, was short-lived; he too had expected financial help from her. For some years she followed a stage career, and raised her two sons.[6] In the eventful decade of the 1950s Durgabai directed a number of documentary films, went abroad three times as part of the Government of India's cultural delegations, and started Durga Khote Productions. Her acting career continued into the 1970s, but in her autobiography she projects herself mainly as a daughter, wife, mother, and grandmother; she also dismisses the idea that the film world tempts women into romantic involvements.

## Nalini Tarkhad

Cinema must have seemed a surprising career for Nalini Tarkhad, the college-graduate daughter of Mumbai's Dr Atmaram Pandurang Tarkhadkar – the famous social reformer, physician, and one of the founders of the Prarthana Samaj (1867).[7] (Her sister Annapurna

[6] The younger son, Bakul, married Vijaya Jayawant but died young. Subsequently Vijaya Khote remarried and became Vijaya Mehta, a very well-known stage and film personality.

[7] *Pardeki Pariyaan: 1913–1990*, Indore: Nai Duniya Visheshank, June 1990, p. 20. The Hindi magazine refers to the actress as Tarkhud.

or Anna Tarkhad was equally well-educated and is known to have charmed Ravindranath Tagore in his youth.) She was the second Maharashtrian Brahmin woman to appear in films at the same time as Durga Khote but never achieved her fame. Her first film was Hindi: producer–director Mohan Bhavnani had cast her as a subsidiary heroine in *Vasantasena* (1931), based on the Sanskrit *Mrichchha-katik* and shot in Bangalore. She joined Prabhat which encouraged newcomers and was cast in *Amrit Manthan* (1934) in the lead role against Sureshbabu Mane; the same pair appeared in *Chandrasena* (1934). She received wide notice in *Rajput Ramani* (1936) and her melodious voice was much appreciated. She soon married Keshavrao Dhaibar and had to leave films, as was required by the rules which prohibited such relationships. He resigned as a Prabhat partner as well and launched his own film company which was closed down after a couple of unsuccessful films.

## Shanta Apte

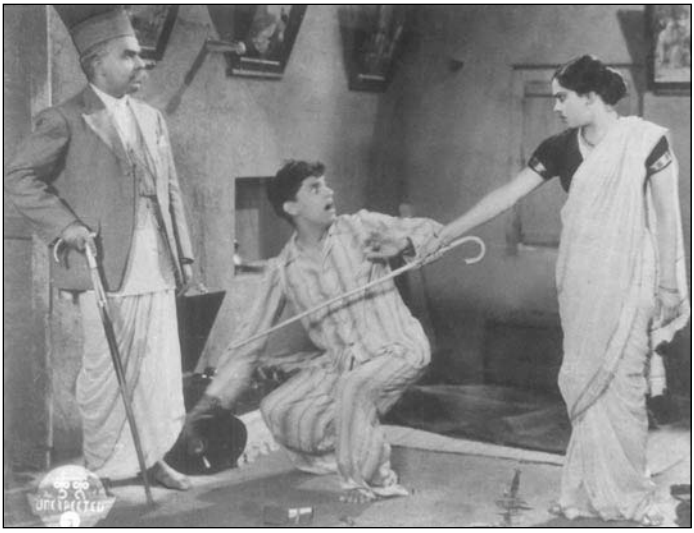

**Plate 14.1:** Scene from *Kunku* with Shanta Apte as Neera, Keshavrao Date as Kakasaheb, and Raja Nene, 1937.

Of Prabhat's early heroines, Shanta Apte (1916–1964) went on to make a name for herself in both Marathi and Hindi films. Daughter of an ordinary Brahmin family, she was formally trained in Music in

Pandharpur and sang in melas which led to her being 'discovered'.[8] She appeared as a teenager in Saraswati Cinetone's mythological *Shyamsundar* in Pune about 1933. Her role as Radha was unremarkable for either acting or singing, though the film celebrated its silver jubilee.

After a couple of films she signed a five-year contract with Prabhat. Keshavrao Bhole took great pains with her singing (despite his initial doubts about her ability) and her secondary role in *Amrit Manthan* (1934) was noticed both for her acting and singing. Her popularity also in North India was a distribution breakthrough for Prabhat. She brought spontaneity to her singing as part of her acting which contrasted with the prevalent stagey style. She had secondary roles in *Rajput Ramani* (Hindi, 1936) with Nalini Tarkhad in the lead, and in *Amarjyoti* (Hindi, 1936) with Durga Khote. In the latter film, she played the kidnapped princess Nandini who comes into her own as a feminist woman of the future under pirate queen Saudamini's influence. The girlish-looking Shantabai gave a good account of herself and her songs gained immense popularity, especially '*Suno suno banake prani*' in which she addresses the animals in the woods near the pirates' cave as their queen. (The story goes that Shantabai was compelled to repeat this song sequence several times, without achieving a satisfactory result. Finally someone brought her a cup of tea, and much refreshed, she gave an excellent performance. But when the rough cut was viewed that evening, it was discovered that the cup and saucer were visible in a corner of the frames. The whole scene had to be shot again the following day.)[9]

A year later appeared the most successful of her films: *Kunku/ Duniya Na Mane*. Here she came into her own for the first time as a young but emotionally mature woman – with a striking change in her personality within just a year. She proved her musical talent and also versatility by singing Longfellow's 'Psalm of Life' along with other songs. Neera's rebellion against her marriage to an old widower is a generalised protest against injustice, but not against him as a person. When Kakasaheb's son Pandit tries to make overtures to her, she

[8] Rajadhyaksha and Willemen, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*, pp. 44–45. Other sources of information are Shantaram, *Shantarama*; and Watve, *Ek Hoti Prabhat-nagari*.

[9] Watve, *Ek Hoti Prabhat-nagari*, p. 120.

makes him apologise for the offence – not to her, but to his father (Plate 14.1).

The following year she played Radha (against young Krishna played by Ram Marathe who later became a famous singer–actor) in *Gopal-krishna* (Marathi and Hindi, 1938). This was a mythological without the usual quota of miracles. Again Shantabai's records sold in thousands.

But when *Manoos/Admi* was being produced in 1938, Shantaram sidelined her although she was contracted to Prabhat, and searched for a new and older actress. What ensued is available to us only in Shantaram's version, as follows.[10] Shantabai threw a tantrum, insisted unsuccessfully on being released from her contract, and finally went on a hunger strike at the security guard's booth at the gate of Prabhat Studio. She was assisted in all this by her older brother and guardian Baburao who invited journalists to interview her; most newspapers including *The Times of India* published a news item of the injustice done to the actress. (Shantabai was adept at handling newspapers; Shantaram mentions that when Baburao Patel published defamatory material about her in *Film India*, she went to Mumbai and literally caned him.) Shantaram dismisses the episode of the fast as a publicity stunt (her metal water-pot contained milk which she sipped continuously): he resolved the impasse satisfactorily and finally carried Shantabai bodily to her car – at which point she threw her arms around his neck and started kissing his face (apparently she had tried to seduce him on earlier occasions also), but he extricated himself.[11] This was the end of her association with Prabhat.

Shantabai went on to make films with other Marathi and Hindi studios and her *Swayamsiddha* (Hindi, 1949) received wide popularity. She featured in the Tamil film *Savithri* in the title role with the Carnatic music star M.S. Subbulakshmi playing the role of Narad.

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Unlike her contemporaries Shantabai did not write her autobiography; her only and small (108-page) book addresses the oft-asked

[10] Shantaram, *Shantarama*, pp. 232–38.

[11] Shantaram has alleged that several women – including minor actresses and even a young German technician who helped him in Berlin – tried to seduce him. He claims to have never succumbed.

question by youngsters as to whether they should enter the film industry.[12] The only facts she reveals about herself are that she had an extraordinarily melodious voice since childhood which was noticed when she sang during the Ganesh festival melas, that her older brother Baburao encouraged her to cultivate this 'divine gift' to attain a high artistic ideal, and that she eagerly embraced musical training towards that goal, with full support from her mother, three sisters, and five brothers. The rest of the book is devoted to analysing the structure of the film industry and its components such as directors, producers, distributors; their divergent (and self-serving) agendas; and the need for an actor to negotiate his way through all these. She is convinced that youngsters wish to enter films not for the vast amounts of money it brings but for easy publicity; and wants to warn them of the pitfalls involved in a film career.

What else is known of Shantabai's life comes from oral sources hinting that her innocently attractive screen image concealed a dismal and fractured personal life. This has been captured not in a biography, but in a poignant play. In his *Kachecha Chandra* (A Glass Moon, 1970), the famous Marathi playwright Suresh Khare uses the metaphor of glittering artificiality to portray the uncrowned empress of the silver screen who was reduced in her personal life to a slave – an object of multiple exploitations.[13] The three-act play powerfully underscores the graph of this innocent dewy-eyed girl's life which diverges so radically from an average middle-class girl's as to carry her to the depths of degradation even while she continues to receive adulation from untold numbers of fans. Young Shakuntala is poised on the threshold of womanhood and marriage as the play opens; a good match found for her simultaneously relieves and exacerbates the anxiety of her impoverished father who has just paid off the debts incurred by his older daughters' weddings. Shaku's older, self-centred stepbrother ekes out a living for himself by selling cinema tickets in the black market. Confronted by her father's dilemma, Shaku accepts an offer from a film director and gradually gets mired in the tinsel world, a puppet controlled by her stepbrother at whose mercy she finds herself after her parents' death. The two men who want to marry her die mysteriously, one in a car accident and the other by

[12] Shanta Apte, *Jau Mi Cinemat?* Mumbai: B. Govind (Shanta Apte Concerns, Prakashan 1), 1940.

[13] Suresh Khare, *Kachecha Chandra*, Pune: Joshi Brothers Booksellers and Publishers, 1970. The play was first performed in Mumbai in 1969.

his own hand – with suspicion pointing at the villainous brother. The crucial revelation at the end confirms that Shaku has been seduced and blackmailed (with the help of revealing photos) by him for years, forced to take to drink as an anodyne, and pressured to provide him with money and sexual favours.

In his autobiography Suresh Khare contextualises this play and reveals all his sources of information about the actress, though (as in the preface of the play) without mentioning Shanta Apte's name.[14] The salient features of the actress's exploitation by her brutal brother are confirmed here – the physical coercion (including lashings with a hunter), forced addiction to liquor, practical incarceration in the house, and wringing out money from her performances.[15]

## Shanta Hublikar

Shanta Hublikar (1914–1992), best known and admired for her role in *Manoos*, as an outwardly carefree and fun-loving prostitute (though inwardly warm, caring, and sensitive), was an actress of meteoric popularity and a tragically exploited life.[16] Her autobiography sheds light on an ordinary woman's struggle for security in western India in the 20th century.

Born in a village near Hubli in Karnataka as Rajamma in a Lingayat Vani family and orphaned at the age of three, she was raised by an affectionate grandmother who was compelled to give her away in adoption to a rich but unloving acquaintance in Hubli during a severe famine. The plain and undowered girl, now renamed Shanta, remained unmarried at the 'late' age of 14. Her closest friend Ambu was married but childless and wanted her as a co-wife. But afraid that after producing a son she might become superfluous and even be abandoned, Shanta refused. Her desperate adoptive mother tried

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[14] Suresh Khare, *Mi Suresh Khare*, Pune: Prajakta Prakashan, 2012, pp. 206–14.

[15] Khare confirmed to me that Shaku in the play was Shanta Apte of real life in a personal communication on 12 November 2012 in Mumbai and has allowed me to record it in writing. Shantabai also had a daughter (presumably born of this union); she acknowledges her mother but is vague about her father.

[16] Shanta Hublikar, *Kashala Udyachi Bat* (Atma-kathan), Pune: Shrividya Prakashan, 1990. The title, 'Why talk of tomorrow?' derives from a popular song in *Manoos*.

**Plate 14.2:** Scene from *Manoos* with Shanta Hublikar as Maina and Shahu Modak as Ganpat, 1939.

to marry her off to an old man. She discovered the plot through Ambu and her husband; the latter took her to Gadag to join a theatre company. Later in 1935 at the age of 21 she joined films in Kolhapur. She had already been trained in singing by Abdul Karim Khan and Sureshbabu Mane at Hubli.

In Kolhapur she stayed with Hirabai Badodekar and Sureshbabu, and went with them to Pune in 1937 when her film contract ended. There she worked as a playback singer in Prabhat and was selected to play opposite Shahu Modak in Prabhat's *Maza Mulaga* (*Mera Ladka* in Hindi with Ulhas, directed by K. Narayan Kale, 1938) at a princely monthly salary of Rs 300 which was raised to Rs 500 for *Manoos* in which she shot to fame. She left Prabhat in 1939, joined Sunrise Film Company in Mumbai on an unprecedented monthly salary of Rs 8,000 for the Hindi film *Ghar ki Laj* and later acted in other Marathi, Hindi, and Kannada films. One of her popular films was the Marathi *Pahila Palana* (The First Child) made for Baburao Pendharkar's New Huns Pictures (with screenplay and direction by Vishram Bedekar, 1942). Later Bedekar valorised in his autobiography Shantabai's instant identification with the role even for an isolated

shot, and her skill in combining spontaneity with an awareness of camera angles.[17]

Having already reached the peak of success and wealth at Pune, Shantabai (who had retained her simple lifestyle) felt an acute need for male guidance and protection in the film world. In 1939 she married Mr Gite (Gitay), a shopkeeper and family man who had advised her on a variety of matters. But Gite started to use her as an unending source of income to maintain his first wife and seven children frugally, and himself in luxury. Their high standard of living included a luxurious house and two cars. But he would not let her out of sight for fear she would leave him and refused to grant her a divorce to foil her chances of a second marriage (when a good suitor proposed to her). While jealously guarding her, he had affairs with other women. Her later career was sporadic and not very successful; her last film was the Hindi *Ghar Grahasti* (1958).

Even a modicum of happiness eluded Shantabai in personal life. Her money was steadily siphoned off first by Gite and later by their son Pradeep. Finally she was ousted from her large house (the well-known 'Deep – originally Pradeep – Bungalow', off Senapati Bapat Road in Pune) by her son and daughter-in-law, and lived for many years in anonymity (as Shanta Gite) in an old people's home in a Mumbai suburb under miserable conditions. Ironically *Manoos* was once screened there, but no one recognised her and some even asserted that Shanta Hublikar was long dead. After some years she was discovered by the editor of a Marathi daily, who wrote about her in 1988. The public response was immediate: contributions poured in, she was felicitated, and the following year she was comfortably settled in an old people's home at Pune to spend the last years of her life in comfort. The orphan who was practically 'sold' during a famine, enjoyed immense popularity, minted money, was cheated out of it by her own husband and son, finally died in an old people's home – but with dignity.

## Hansa Wadkar

The worst stereotype of a film actress's life was represented by Hansa Wadkar (1923–1971) in her autobiography.[18] She sketches a

[17] Bedekar, *Ek Zad ani Don Pakshi*, pp. 213–14.

[18] Hansa Wadkar, *Sangatye Aika*, Pune: Rajhans Prakashan, 2003 (1970). The title means 'Listen, I'm telling you' – a phrase which usually preceded

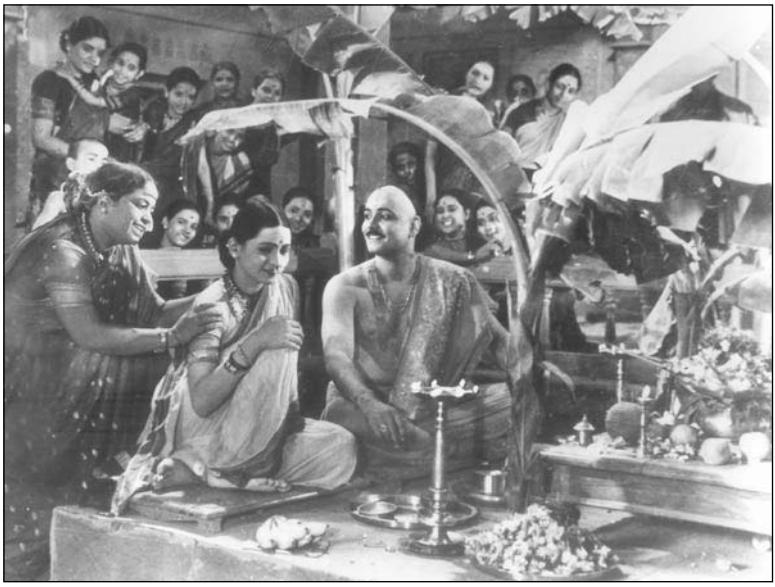

**Plate 14.3:** Scene from *Sant Sakhu* with Hansa Wadkar as Sakhu (centre), 1942.

tattered life, underlined with exploitation, physical and emotional abuse, and aggravated by self-destructive obstinacy. Hansa, née Ratan Salgaonkar, was born in 1923 in coastal Sawantwadi, in a family of female entertainers who defied tradition and entered into marriages. As a young girl, she was trained in singing with appropriate actions by her accomplished grandmother, but dreamed of completing her studies before settling down to a conventional married life. She and her only surviving sibling (brother Mohan) went to school. Their mother, possessively fond of her son, treated the girl harshly and on occasion beat her mercilessly for her obstinacy. Her father was fond of her but took to drinking which was to gradually impoverish the family. She was surrounded by relatives and their children her own age, as well as school friends. The neighbouring Bandarkar family had a son, Jagannath, who pestered Ratan to marry him and extracted a promise to that effect from her.

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a lavani in a tamasha; Hansabai's popularity depended on her acting in tamasha-based Marathi films after Independence.

A family connection with the film world had framed Ratan's life from childhood: one of her paternal aunts was married to the actor Master Vinayak, and started acting in his Huns Pictures. Another paternal aunt had entered films independently and used the surname 'Wadkar' so as not to tarnish the family name, though her identity was known and little Ratan was teasingly harassed by her friends.

The first turning point came when Ratan was 10 and the family funds were exhausted by her drunkard father. Her actress–aunt suggested that Ratan earn an income in the film industry. She protested having to leave school, but her brother's education was considered more important, so that she became the family breadwinner. By this time they had settled in Mumbai. But her first encounter with the film industry had already occurred a couple of years earlier when Shalini Cinetone of Kolhapur had sent a car to Sawantwadi to fetch her and her father for an audition. There the singer–actor Govindrao Tembe and the famous tabla player Thirakwa asked her to sing; she passed the trial but nothing further came of it. In Mumbai 10-year-old Ratan was approached by Bapusaheb Pendharkar's newly established Lalitakala Company which was to make the film *Vijayachi Lagne* (Vijaya's Marriages, 1938), based on B.V. Varerkar's story. Varerkar, a family friend, had himself persuaded her, because she looked older than she was. Thus at 10 she became a heroine, earning Rs 250 a month. Her brother made her change her name to save his reputation, and she became Hansa Wadkar. She now developed an intense interest in the theatre as well and saw as many plays as possible. Many film offers followed: some of the films remained incomplete, but she was happy enough with the salary. Besides, by 13, she had about 10 pictures to her credit which had been released.

Meanwhile, her family (living on her income) was settled in Mumbai, the brother for whom she had sacrificed her education did not complete school but tried his hand unsuccessfully at photography and was ultimately supported by her. The family's financial crisis continued as her mother also became an alcoholic. Bandarkar, now in Mumbai himself, pursued her single-mindedly and made her announce their betrothal so as to discourage possible competition from her actor friends. Then he made her quit films and join his 'Dramatic Union' which soon failed. But their regular meetings made her mother suspicious enough to berate her in a drunken fit. Incensed at this injustice, Hansa rushed to consummate the relationship and married Bandarkar at 14 when she was already pregnant.

He came to stay with her family, though Hansa had a miscarriage after a quarrel with her mother.

The dream of a contented married life eluded Hansabai, as she miscarried again and produced only one daughter. Bandarkar forced her back into films to support her alcoholic parents and to maintain his own lavish lifestyle, complete with mistresses. Worse was his constant questioning of her fidelity leading to occasional battering, in an echo of her mother's previous treatment of her. As an act of revenge – against him, but in essence against herself – she took to occasional drinking, hurting herself more than she hurt him. Her parents having gone back to Sawantwadi, she was at his mercy.

The newly established Bombay Talkies then appointed Hansabai on a salary of Rs 350 a month. The proprietor Himanshu Roy had a friendly and caring relationship with all in this efficiently run organisation. His wife Devika Rani starred with Ashok Kumar in *Durga* (1939) – a film in which Hansabai acted for the first time as a 'side heroine'. She was pregnant again at this time, but had another miscarriage, being only 16 and unable to take adequate care of herself. Her co-workers tried to protect her through all this and Roy gave her leave at full pay. The Bombay Talkies film *Kangan* had starred Leela Chitnis who developed a throat problem at the time of the shooting and could not sing, so that Hansabai was made to help as a playback singer. When Roy died in 1939, Hansabai opted out of the remaining three years of her contract; but during the previous three years she had made three films.

Soon enough, Prabhat approached her to play the lead in *Sant Sakhu* (Marathi and Hindi, 1942). Ironically a tired Hansabai was unable to sing well at the ill-timed audition, and the music director Keshavrao Bhole rather hastily announced that she could not sing and would need a playback. Instead of explaining the situation and postponing the audition by another day, the hot-headed actress not only complied but also refused to sing a single song – in her usual self-destructive fashion. But she immersed herself in her role to the extent that she was not even considered for the light role of a college girl in Prabhat's next film. A few months after the film's release, Shantaram left Prabhat in 1942 and started his Rajkamal studio.

Hansabai worked in Prabhat's *Ramshastri* (1944) based on Maratha history and in the devotional *Sant Janabai* (1949). Then rather paradoxically she played her first role as a tamasha dancer in Rajkamal's *Lokshahir Ram Joshi* (1947) which was followed by

a spate of similar and equally famous roles in *Pudhacha Paul* (The Next Step, 1950) and *Mi Tulas Tujhya Angani* (I am the Tulashi Plant in Your Garden, 1955). Typecast as a tamasha dancer, she enjoyed great popularity.

But personal unhappiness drove her to drink and male company, sometimes with disastrous consequences. One such casual friendship turned into a nightmare as her man friend practically incarcerated her for three years in his Marathwada home as his third (and unofficial) wife and household slave. By the time she was rescued and brought back home, she had lost her niche in the film industry. She finally concentrated on the stage, left her husband and child, and lived alone or occasionally with various men friends.

Hansabai's parting advice to parents of aspiring girls is: 'if you are wise and mindful of your daughter's welfare, don't allow her anywhere near the film line'.[19] Her own experience was that acting in films is an addiction impossible to give up, and that no woman, not even a pativrata, can remain chaste in this world full of temptations.

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Hansa Wadkar's autobiography 'inspired' the film *Bhumika* (The Role, 1977) directed by Shyam Benegal with Smita Patil in the lead role as Usha, which won national and international acclaim and awards. The title is a felicitous metaphor for film roles and also for Usha's life as a form of role-playing. As an artistic creation which used Hansabai's life as a springboard, the film obviously has a life of its own and has endowed Usha with a life of her own as well, as emphasised by both Benegal and the main script-writer Girish Karnad.[20] The many divergences between the two narratives are thus ultimately irrelevant.

The film is a feminist reconstruction of a woman from a disadvantaged background struggling for self-recognition in a patriarchal world, which can be read on many levels. For example, her many adventures in search of fulfilment include the newly inserted episode

[19] Wadkar, *Sangatye Aika*, p. 67.

[20] The following discussion is a combined gist based on separate and brief telephonic discussions with Benegal and Karnad on 25 February 2013. My reading of their positions was approved by both by email on 5 March 2013.

of Usha's love affair and failed suicide pact with a film director (played by Naseeruddin Shah) which is a comment on the film industry. At the end of these episodes, Usha reconciles herself to the fact that personal independence means shedding her constant reliance on men – in a world which defines women solely in relation to a man – and paying the price in terms of aloneness and loneliness.

The reader of the autobiography may find the screen Usha to be a far more sensitive and vulnerable woman, and more sinned against than sinning. Hansabai also comes across as a victim of her circumstances, but her self-victimisation through self-destructive obstinacy is elided in the film. Benegal sees Usha as a viable feminist model faithful to the timeframe it portrays. But her optimistic trajectory towards a quest for selfhood was unhappily not paralleled in Hansabai's life.

## Leela Chitnis

The film world was a double-edged weapon for Leela Chitnis (1912–2003): it brought her artistic fulfilment, heady success, popular adulation, and wealth, even while it turned her personal life into a constant test of endurance.[21]

Born in a Brahmin family, Leela Nagarkar was nurtured in a conventional home mileu, strictly guarded by her impressive and erudite school-principal father. It was only years later that she discovered he had had several mistresses and a child (which died in infancy) by at least one of them. Leela grew up happily among her three brothers and three sisters in various cities, before finally settling down in Mumbai. Her father died just as she was to complete her schooling. Entering college life was like being overwhelmed by a vast ocean of new experiences. But within a couple of months, before fully enjoying the wide horizons of the new life, she met Dr Chitnis, a widower who had just returned from England with a PhD and displayed varied interests. The charmed 16-year-old Leela wanted to marry him and her recently widowed mother was compelled to give her consent after Leela's attempted suicide. The marriage in 1928 led Leela into a world of social reform, Chitnis being involved with the Prarthana Samaj on a low salary. Suddenly he switched his energies to the freedom struggle and socialism, hero-worshipping M.N. Roy who

[21] Chitnis, *Chanderi Duniyet.*

had just returned to India and lived in Mumbai in hiding. Leelabai's first son was named Manavendra after him; two more sons and a short-lived daughter were born within the six years that the marriage lasted. (Chitnis refused to practise family planning; Leelabai had inadequate knowledge of or access to such methods.) When the early and heady days of marriage were over, he was unemployed and she was compelled to eke out a living for the family by coaching school students at Rs 40 a month and then working as a junior teacher in a girls' school. Chitnis took up with fashionable girls and enjoyed life. Then suddenly he veered towards the theatre world through Natya Manwantar and went to Pune. Through a family acquaintance, playwright Varerkar, Leelabai obtained her BA degree from Nagpur University as an external student.

In 1934 Chitnis practically forced Leelabai to join Natya Manwantar in Pune to fill the void left by Jyotsna Bhole's sudden departure. (The sons were left in Mumbai under the care of a trusted woman, with Leelabai dashing up to Mumbai whenever possible.) At first she could only act in the comedy *Usana Navara* after proper coaching by Keshavrao Date (see Plate 4.2). Gradual training in music enabled her to act in the three plays made famous by Jyotsnabai. Soon after joining she received a love letter from Vinayak Pendharkar with whom she had had a very brief affair; in her absence Chitnis opened, read, and destroyed the letter. The marriage was over for all practical purposes and Chitnis left her soon afterwards, leaving a brief note for her.

When Natya Manwantar closed down, Leelabai turned to Marathi films through Huns Pictures and had a long relationship with Baburao Pendharkar. He had promised marriage, but she realised that this would not happen. However, he deliberately ruined her chance of marrying actor Gajanan Jagirdar.

Leelabai joined Prabhat for which she made *Vahaan* (Hindi, 1937); her later career was almost entirely in Hindi films. After a couple of low-grade films, earning barely enough to support herself and her children, she was offered a role in *Jailer* by Sohrab Modi's Minerva Movietone at Rs 1,000 a month. She married a film distributor identified as 'Guli' who began to cheat her in money and other matters and drink heavily. With him she had a child, son Raj, despite all precautions. During this time she also acted in Chandulal Shah's *Tulsidas*. After divorcing Guli she seems to have tumbled into other relationships.

Her real chance came in 1939 when she signed a three-year contract with Himanshu Roy of Bombay Talkies. Her first film *Kangan* with Ashok Kumar was such a hit that after her second film *Bandhan*, her salary zoomed to Rs 4,000. This became a phenomenally popular romantic pair after their third film *Jhoola*.

After ten years she was superseded by younger actresses and started to play 'character roles', mostly the mother of the leading star. She made *Shahid* (1948) as Dilip Kumar's mother, and is best remembered as Raj Kapur's mother in *Awara* (1951). She records having once been compelled by Ashok Kumar to refuse the role of his mother-in-law, although she badly needed the money – the reason being his unwillingness to disturb their earlier image as an onscreen romantic pair. She also turned to the Marathi stage and to Hindi films made by studios based in Madras. The last entry in her long filmography spanning 41 years is dated 1980.

Through this chequered career Leelabai went through several romantic entanglements which she mentions candidly. In all these she was openly exploited financially and in other ways by the men involved. Managing the roles of a career woman, housewife, and mother was a struggle. A weary and disillusioned Leelabai left India in 1981 to settle down with her son in the USA where she died in 2003.

## Snehaprabha Pradhan

Born of highly educated and refined parents, Snehaprabha Pradhan (1920–1993) had long dreamt of becoming a medical doctor.[22] The family lived in Karachi at the time where her father was the founder of Shivaji High School, as well as a writer and orator of repute. Her mother (his much younger second wife) was a college graduate. Both parents were nationalistically inspired and dedicated to education. But Snehaprabha's step-siblings, much older than herself, resented the intrusion of the two women, compelling them in 1936 to set up a small household by themselves, after the father left the family. After two years the girl came to Mumbai and entered medical college. Her beauty and singing talent soon elicited numerous lucrative invitations from film producers who vied with each other to sign her

[22] Snehaprabha Pradhan, *Snehankita*, Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1973.

up; she rejected them all without any regret. However, her mother's long illness (starting with incurable rheumatism and ending in cancer) forced her to abandon her medical studies after a year and earn her livelihood.

Snehaprabha entered films in 1939 with Bombay Talkies' Hindi *Punarmilan* (A Reunion) with Kishor Sahu: the two fell in love, married, but separated after a year and obtained a divorce after a mandatory wait of seven years. (She mentions in her autobiography that the marriage was not consummated.) Her main problem with screen and stage acting was an allergy to make-up with which she had to battle with various cures. Her first Marathi film was Navayug's *Pahili Mangalagaur* (1942, directed by Vinayak and Junnarkar) in which she sang her own songs. In Navayug's *Dinraat* (Day and Night, 1945, with Paresh Banerjee) she played a medical doctor. She acted in many Marathi plays as well. Her last film was the Hindi *Biraha Ki Raat* (A Night of Separation, 1950) with Nargis and Dev Anand.

Except for a brief sojourn at Pune in 1942, Snehaprabha was based in Mumbai when her mother was under medical treatment until her death in 1946. The following year she flew to England; during her absence, Navayug, already in a shambles, declared insolvency. Snehaprabha had to sell her jewellery to buy a steamer ticket home. The money that was owed to her was never paid. Various other studios cheated her out of thousands of rupees as well, through postdated cheques that bounced.

Snehaprabha's maternal aunt, who ostensibly looked after her, sponged on her instead and cleaned up her house of all valuables. But the actress had no other company except a large number of pets (dogs, cats, birds) whom she doted on. Out of loneliness she agreed to marry a man who wooed her, but this marriage was also unsuccessful because of the avarice of his family members who treated her solely as a source of easy money. When she was pregnant and wanted to quit working in theatre, he advised her to have an abortion. She was forced to do so because of clinical complications.

Later she met Dr S.V. Shirodkar, a gynaecologist of international repute, who was her doctor and neighbour. With a seniority of 21 years, he was old enough to be her father and their multi-layered relationship was intensely romantic but platonic. Afraid of his wife, he preferred it to be clandestine when Mrs Shirodkar was in town, although she found out. Snehaprabha wanted to meet his now furious wife socially and show her that her relationship with Shirodkar

was innocent. But he insisted on walking a tightrope and reduced Snehaprabha to an emotional wreck: he wanted her entirely on his own terms and would not set her free. She is remarkably clear-sighted about his strong, typically male instinct for self-preservation, and his desire to have the women of his family, work-place and friends' circle revolve around him and love him. The relationship lasted for 18 years until his death in 1971; her autobiography focuses chiefly on it, with the pages from 26 to the concluding page 239 covering its myriad facets through illustrative incidents. In fact she wrote a Marathi play – *Sarvasvi Tuzach* (Entirely Yours, 1957) focusing on the tragic relationship of a single woman with a married man as unravelled through letters. (The play showed the relationship to be physical which, she stresses, was not so in her own case.)

Of all the Marathi autobiographies of actresses reviewed here, Snehaprabha's stands out for her acuity and perspicacity articulated through pithy comments about women's social disabilities and the asymmetrical gender relationship.

> An intelligent man who is emotionally sensitive is not easy to find. An intelligent man can live happily with a woman of mediocre intelligence, because Nature and society have given him a great deal of freedom. He is content even if his wife manages the household and keeps him company in bed. He spends most of his time outside the home during which he can obtain whatever pleasure and joy he can from his favourite men and women. His wife is his companion, but not the *only* one.
>
> But a married woman has to obtain all her intellectual and emotional satisfaction from only one man, one individual – her husband. If she leaves the rut and develops only a simple friendship for the sake of obtaining knowledge, it leads to conflict and gives rise to rumours both within the family and outside. Her married life is ruined.
>
> Most women are able to live contentedly with the social status and well-being brought by marriage. But women ever hungry for knowledge (and they are fortunately very few) are not happy with just that. A woman's life shrinks after marriage.[23]

It is relevant here that Snehaprabha always remained passionate about things medical and took a keen interest in Shirodkar's medical activities; she even illustrated his book on gynaecology, having read

[23] Pradhan, *Snehankita*, p. 23.

up and understood the exact placement and function of the organs involved.

> Many of my sisters may be aware of what a single woman has to suffer either within or outside the rut cut by society. A woman who lives alone – being unmarried, widowed, or deserted – is not really needed in a family … I used to think that I feel this not because I am alone, but because I am an actress. But most women in this situation have the same experience. Even if a woman receives kicks from her husband, he is a very useful creature because she wears her mangalsutra [black beads signifying her married status] as a shield to protect herself from others. That is why a girl's parents struggle to get her married in time so that she has a provider of the mangalsutra – no matter what he is like, even if he is blind, cross-eyed, lame, or maimed. Even the pretence of protection is very effective at times.[24]

Snehaprabha's most poignant observation is about her self-avowed love relationship:

> Surrogate relationships, no matter how dear, are reduced to dust in an instant, as I realized that day. I also realized that the rights conferred by a blood relationship may rot in time but they are acknowledged by society and by law. A love relationship can claim a right to only one thing – pining! It is nurtured by one's own tears and emotions! It lives in order to die for another![25]

Among other actresses was Meenakshi Shirodkar (née Ratan Pednekar, 1916–1997) of a courtesan family of Goa who married a mechanic of Kolhapur at 15.[26] The city was known for its vigorous film industry, and she was invited to act in Huns Pictures' *Brahmachari* (Marathi and Hindi, 1938) opposite Master Vinayak. This on-screen romantic pair became highly popular. Meenakshibai acted in 15 films before 1947 and eight afterwards, and also acted on the musical stage. Her granddaughters Shilpa and Namrata Shirodkar became popular film actresses in the late 20th century.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 24.
[25] *Ibid.*, p. 35.
[26] Desai, *Gomanta Saudamini*, pp. 87–90.

The personal narratives of film actresses of the time paint a discouraging picture of multiple exploitations. But to argue that they were more prone to exploitation than other women inheres the risk of simplification.

By the 1930s, the possibility of young women's salaried employment no longer belonged to the discursive realm, as new economic compulsions made especially lower-middle-class women seek jobs to ensure their natal families' survival. In the process, their parents expected them to sacrifice their marital prospects indefinitely and forego opportunities of personal happiness. These dilemmas were unambiguously articulated by women writers of the time.[27]

The women who entered the entertainment industry belonged either to upper caste families with connections to the literary–cultural scene, or to families of traditional women entertainers. They all enjoyed name, fame, wealth, and artistic satisfaction; most were economically exploited by their husbands or other members of the family, in addition to being subjected to the gender-based double standards of morality; and most spoke of acting as a commitment and an effective escape from the bitter reality of personal life. Their seemingly unlimited earnings were always utilised for maintaining the family or were siphoned off by close relatives, and did not translate into economic independence, empowerment, or happiness in marital life. (Shanta Apte's case of extreme exploitation remains brutally unique.) Money and matrimony were rarely reconciled.

If success on the glamorous silver screen concealed problems and failures in personal life, it also hid the inbuilt gender bias and exploitation within the film industry. When women were exposed to the public gaze on the silver screen, the female body also came to be consciously displayed. The subject is touched upon only by Leela Chitnis, and that too in passing. She claims that actress's treatment by male co-workers could sometimes border on harassment – sexual or otherwise – which had to be quietly endured. But she mentions this in relation to other actresses, not herself.

Society's bias related to age carried over into the film industry, to a larger extent than theatre. While male actors could go on seemingly

[27] See for example Vibhavari Shirurkar's short story on the theme and its analysis in Kosambi (trans. and ed.), *Women Writing Gender*, pp. 52–53, 148–55.

forever, and while Hindi screen heroes like Ashok Kumar, Dilip Kumar and Dev Anand could romance two or three generations of heroines, actresses had a far shorter career span as female leads and graduated to playing the mother. This was detrimental in both financial and emotional terms.

Finally, one wonders whether the screen image of actresses was a reflection of their social – caste and class – background. Durga Khote and Leela Chitnis usually played the 'good woman' (as did Jyotsna Bhole on stage), while Hansa Wadkar and Shanta Hublikar became famous for their roles as public entertainers in the tamasha or similar locales. Was their disprivileged background in a way perpetuated on the screen?

If one approaches actresses' autobiographies to illuminate their perspectives on their film roles or on acting in general, one comes away empty-handed. These turn out to be self-narratives of women who happen to have entered the film profession solely to earn a livelihood, and often by accident. Despite general details on how specific film companies operated, these narratives reveal little of the actresses' inner development or maturity consequent upon playing a variety of roles. Acting seems to have remained extraneous to their lives: they remained women first and actresses second – almost incidental – despite the fame, glamour, and money (which was anyway spent willingly or unwillingly on the family or appropriated by the husband). They are typified by Rangnekar's Bhanumati in *Kulavadhu*, who sacrifices her acting career to revert to her role as a wife (or rather daughter-in-law) without a single backward glance. Not one of these film actresses seems to have enjoyed the film career as a fulfilling experience. Thus these narratives hardly form a distinct genre within the impressively large corpus of women's Marathi autobiographies, except as a rubric.

The issue is further complicated by the extent of 'self-writing'. Some of these works (e.g., by Hansa Wadkar and Shanta Hublikar) are acknowledged to be ghost-written. Whether other self-narratives received similar help is not known, although presumably the choice involving the extent of weightage given to the actual experience of acting – performing different identities – rested with the actresses themselves. Perhaps the short duration of each film and the rapid succession of films failed to leave a deep impact of individual roles or the leisure to savour and analyse them. Perhaps it was the result of

the interiorised restraints which inhibited delving into one's deeper emotional selves. If self-representation as a woman was regarded as a crucial validation and the ultimate purpose of these self-narratives, that in itself is an eloquent enough commentary on their contemporary society.[28]



[28] The male theatre actors' autobiographies also dwell on their personal lives and the internal politics of theatre companies rather than their inner development as actors. This is an equally telling comment on the interest of their putative readers.

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